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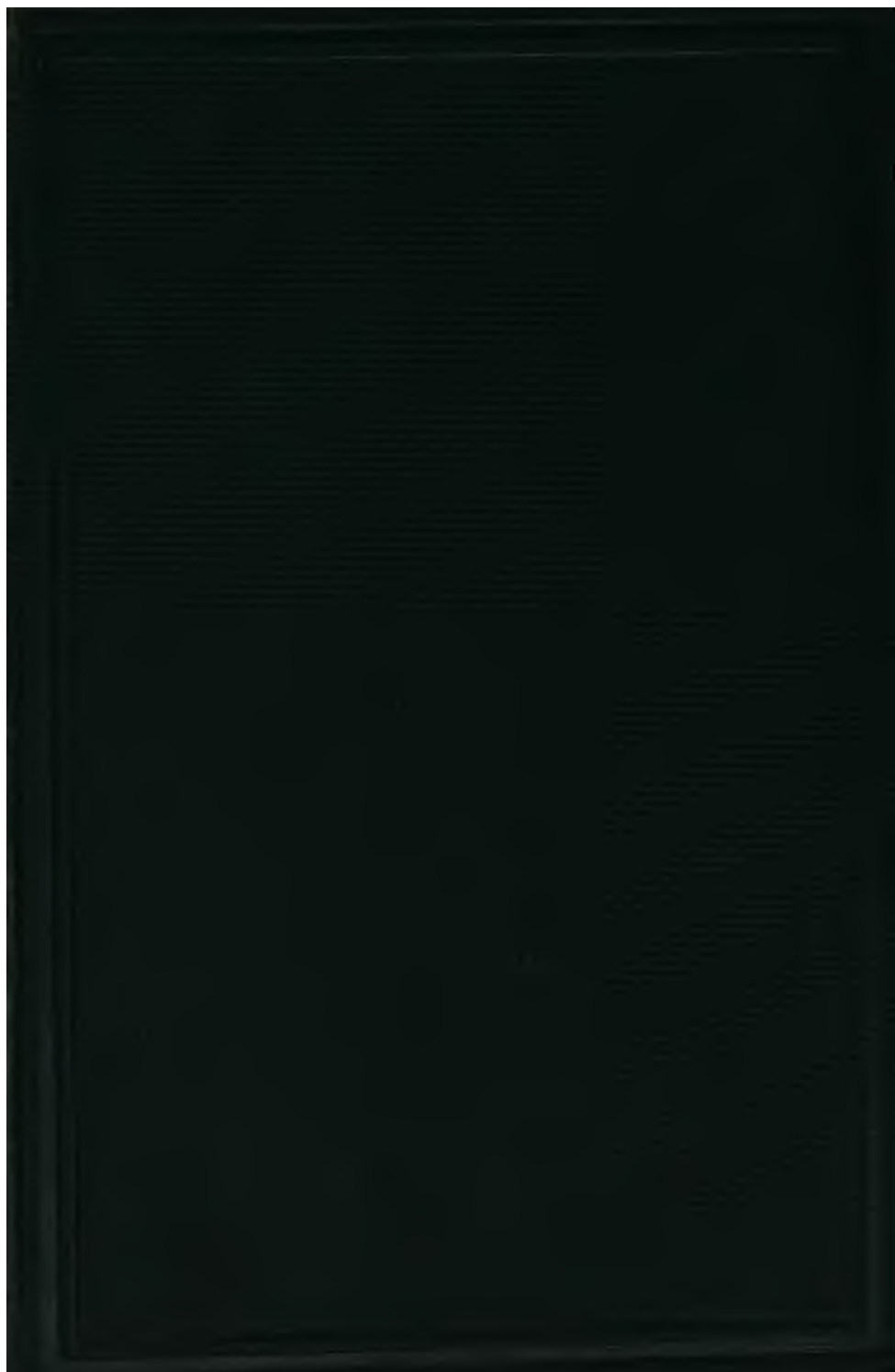
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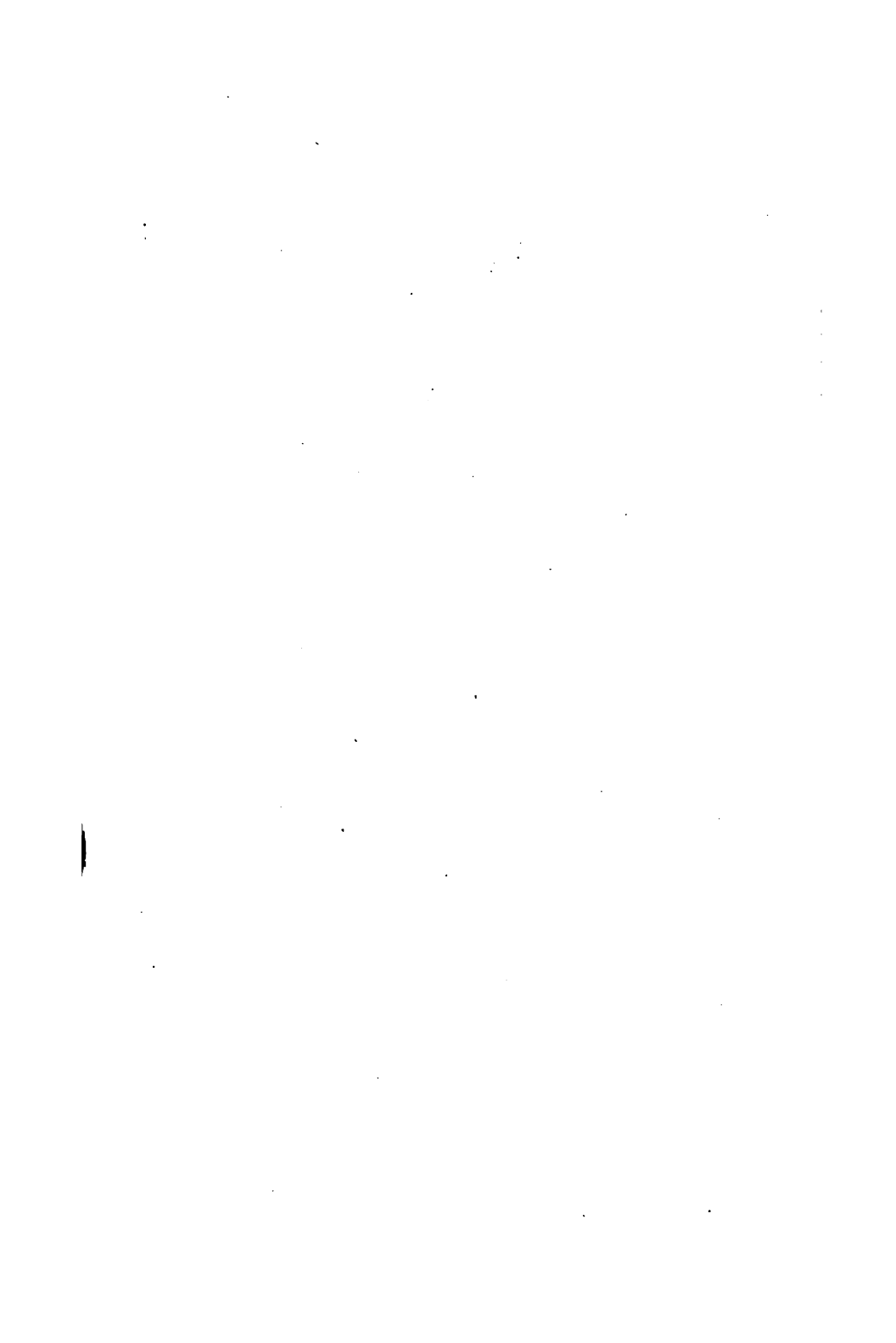






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HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

VOL. III.

HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

BY

MRS. NEWTON CROSLAND,

AUTHOR OF

“MRS. BLAKE,” “THE DIAMOND WEDDING,”

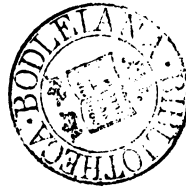
&c. &c.

Commend me to home joy—the family board
Altar and hearth! These with a brisk career
A source of honest profit and good fame,
Just so much work as keeps the brain from rust,
Just so much play as lets the heart expand,
Honouring God and serving man—I say
These are reality, and all else—fluff,
Nutshell, and naught.

ROBERT BROWNING.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:

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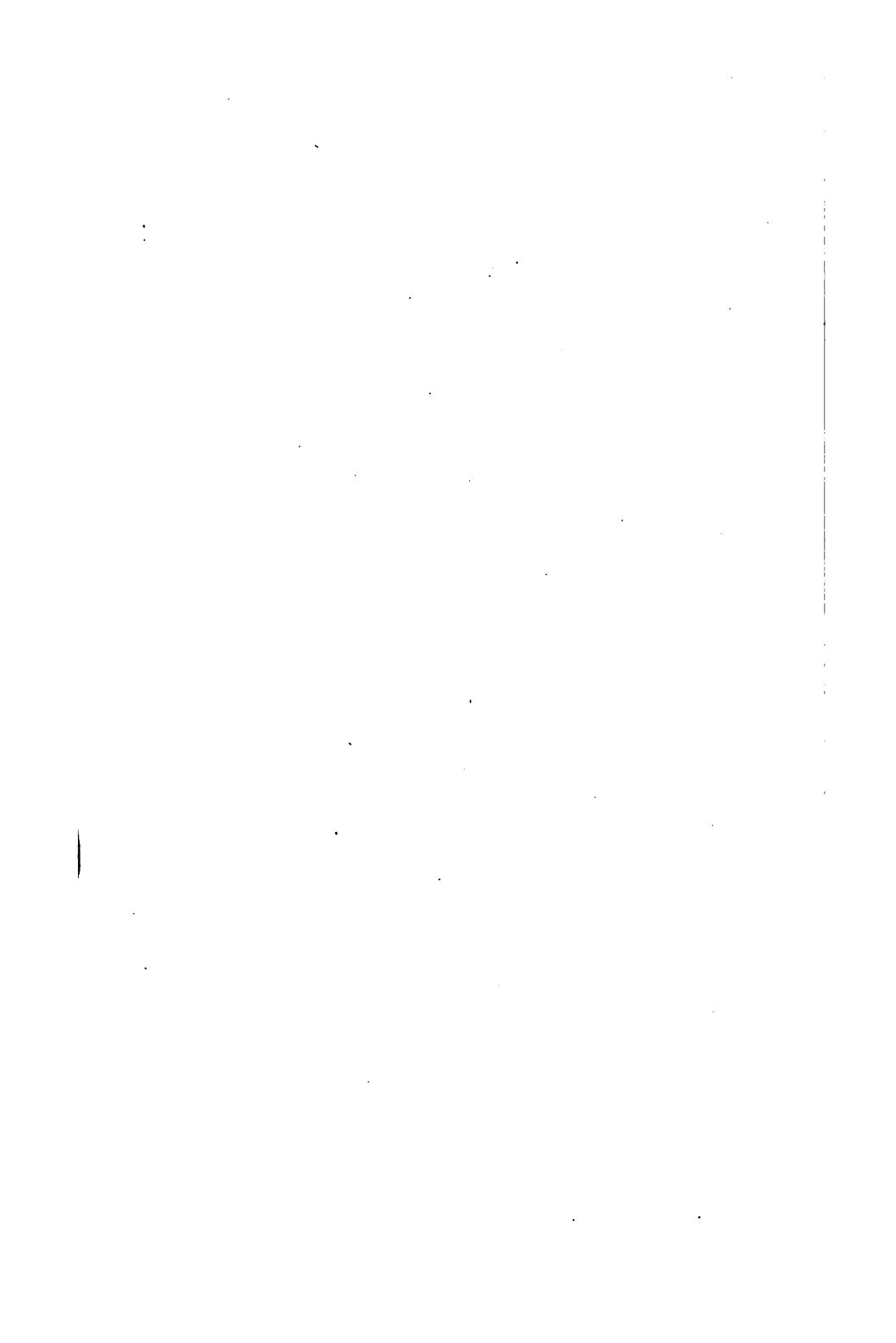
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HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

VOL. III.



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VOL. III.

as Catherine's own maid, and the air was redolent of salvolatile and eau-de-Cologne, while Jenny with tearful face was kneeling beside the sofa, holding smelling salts for Catherine to inhale. We have all heard of death in a ball-room, and death on the stage; and imagination cannot readily picture anything more ghastly than such events. And in a lesser but still proportionate degree it jars on our sense of the fitness of things when physical suffering is associated with gorgeous attire. It seemed the first desire of everyone to get rid of the Court trappings, and the maid was despatched for a morning wrapper and shawl, that Catherine might at once be released from her heavy dress.

Meanwhile Algernon Raybrooke was leaning on the mantelpiece in the dining-room, to which apartment he had withdrawn directly his bell-ringing had brought efficient help. The seizure having taken place in his presence, it was quite natural that he should desire to linger about the house until Catherine should be in some measure recovered, but he was not unduly

anxious about her. Remembering his own wild words and subsequent want of self-control, he was not sure that a simple fainting fit was not a fortunate termination to that memorable interview. Resting his elbow on the marble, his head drooped and his eyes fixed themselves on the ashes in the grate. For the fire, pleasant in the early morning hours, had long since died out. His morbid imagination found in the burnt-out cinders a type of his own heart, and in something of a pagan spirit he accepted the omen. Nevertheless his mind was seething with plans and purposes, every one of which had for its aim to make the future serene for Catherine. Yes, he would go abroad for years; and yet in all respects he would act so discreetly that the subtlest discerners of secret things should never suspect the great disappointment of his life.

Presently Hester Otway came into the room, to bring him the good tidings that Catherine was recovered, and it might be to question Mr. Raybrooke, in some slight degree, concerning the circumstances which preceded the fainting fit;

but Algernon was already well prepared for this probable emergency.

"I assure you," he exclaimed, "I feel myself shockingly to blame, and wholly inexcusable. I ought to have seen and known how excessively fatigued Mrs. Appersley was—and not have stayed babbling as I did. In fact she told me what a tiring day it had been, and I ought to have taken the hint. What business has a man to indulge in five o'clock tea—but I confess that is a weakness of mine."

"A very excusable weakness, I am sure," said Hester with a smile. "After all, it was rather a lucky thing you were in the room. If the fainting fit was, as you say, merely from over-fatigue, it might have taken place when she was quite alone, and then might have been really serious."

Algernon had not said "merely" from over-fatigue, but he did not correct the speaker, and Hester continued,

"I am glad to tell you that Mrs. Appersley is now really quite herself, and she wishes me to

thank you for your prompt attention. Though she remembers nothing, she is sure you must have prevented her from falling to the ground. She hopes, however, you will excuse seeing her again to-day."

"Certainly, certainly. I would not intrude for the world. May I charge you, Miss Otway, to make my adieux and compliments; and also kind remembrances to Mrs. Freeth. I am so grieved for her present anxiety about the younger children. Oh! dear, what a useless animal a man is! If I were but a lady-friend, I might perhaps be of some service. But pray tell her, if I can go anywhere or do anything for her, I hope she will command me."

"I am sure she will be sorry not to have seen you, but you know what a mother she is, and can imagine how she is absorbed at the present moment. I will not forget to tell her what you say, and I am certain she will be very grateful for your kind offer."

"I mean what I say," resumed Algernon, "and far more than I can express. I should feel

it the greatest pleasure and privilege to be of service to anyone of the family. But perhaps," he continued, "the best thing I can now do is to take myself off."

So saying, he shook hands with Hester, and in another minute was out of the house.

Mrs. Freeth was quite resolute in her determination that Janet Gillespie and herself should be the only watchers by the sick-bed of little Lucy. The mother and old nurse were too experienced in the ailments of children to have any doubt that the illness was scarlet-fever—even before the physician asserted that such was the case. He, however, comforted them greatly by his assurance that there were no alarming symptoms; therefore her duties were simple, and perhaps this very circumstance rendered Mrs. Freeth positively obstinate on the point of not admitting Catherine even up the stairs which led to the floor on which the nursery was situated. She heard of her return from the Drawing-room—heard even that she had taken the tea which had been ordered, and there her an-

xiety about Catherine terminated, for no one had been so unkind as to tell her of the fainting-fit. As for her little feminine curiosity about the details of the Presentation, it dwindled into insignificance amid the cares of the sick-room. The perfection of the barley-water was just now of much greater consequence than the admiration of a Prince or the smile of a Duchess.

By dinner-time Catherine was sufficiently recovered to take the head of the table; her only companions being Phoebe and Jane and Hester Otway. From them she heard of the arrangements which had been promptly made to isolate the nursery floor, and realized how completely for the present she was separated from her mother. She felt also keenly aware that on her had devolved the elder-sisterly duty of protecting Phoebe. But on this point she was determined to take council of her husband.

It was nearly midnight when Reuben Appersley returned from the House of Commons, and Catherine, having long since dismissed her maid, was reclining on the sofa in her bed-

chamber, with candles lighted and a book beside her. She had attempted to read, but her mind had wandered from the author's theme, and after a vain effort to control her thoughts, she had given up the task. A glance at her husband as he entered the room showed that something must have gone right with him—that something had put him in that degree of good spirits which, with many men, means good temper, and establishes the happy hour in which it is wisest to discuss domestic affairs, seek counsel, or it may be ask a concession. The fact was that not only a bill in which he was much interested had that night passed the Commons, but within these few hours he had received intelligence which convinced him that George Otway was alive, and, moreover, in England.

These satisfactory events were narrated to his wife in a few pithy sentences, and then he began questioning her about the Drawing-room, without carefully waiting for replies, in the way people are apt to interrogate when they think themselves fully informed on a subject.

"Yes, I heard you got home in good time," he exclaimed, "and looked so radiant as you drove along that I hope the affair was all pleasure."

"Why, who told you anything about me?" said Catherine, with a languid smile.

"Oh! lots of people recognised you. Still, after such a day, I am almost sorry, my love, that you sat up for me."

"Oh, I am not sleepy, and I have a great deal to tell you. I want your advice, and I want your help."

Thereupon Catherine mentioned Mr. Raybrooke's visit, and the object of it, and how it came to pass that the communication concerning Phoebe had been made to her instead of to her mother. When she had told the story quite clearly, she added,

"I hope you will agree with me that it was an act of real friendship on Mr. Raybrooke's part to tell us what he had seen?"

"Well, I suppose it was; and mighty disagreeable to him, I should think."

"Yes, I am sure he felt it so," resumed Catherine; "but, then, many things which are kind and wise to do are, as you say, mighty disagreeable."

"Rawlins deserves to be kicked!" observed Reuben.

"Metaphorically, yes," said Catherine; "and when my father comes home he certainly must be informed of the discovery. It would be cruel to distress mamma just now; at the same time, I may find it difficult to control Phoebe."

"But you can warn her," returned Reuben; "and if afterwards she takes the bit between her teeth, the fault will not be yours."

"Oh! Reuben, do not talk in that way—remember how young she is."

"Young! She is very nearly as old as you were when we became engaged, and, I am afraid, a vast deal more knowing than you, Kitty, are ever likely to be. I am sorry to think it of a sister of yours, but I am afraid Phoebe is decidedly fast, and I daresay the con-

sciousness of her independence makes her self-willed. However, speak to her in the morning, and, at any rate, keep her from seeing the scamp till your father returns."

Then, his mind being very full of the subject, Reuben dilated on the discovery he had made of George Otway being absolutely in England. The chain of evidence was a little intricate, but of the fact there was no doubt, and to him it was an unmitigated satisfaction. He believed himself near the fruition of all his hopes, and that now once and for ever he should wipe away all stain from the name of Appersley.

"I would give half my fortune to refute that slander," he exclaimed, warming with his own words. "Would not you?"

"Cheerfully," said Catherine, "since I see it is so near your heart to bring the truth to light. And yet—and yet I have an instinct against disturbing the repose of the dead."

"Yes, yes, you have said all that before," interrupted Reuben, with a touch of irritability in his tone; "but I know thoroughly well what I am about."

"Of course—of course you do," returned Catherine, with all wifelike meekness; "and I am sure I feel as much as you do that fair fame is only second in value to a pure conscience."

Without any intentional concealment, it did so happen that Catherine never mentioned her fainting-fit. Had her husband made more personal inquiries, or been less engrossed with subjects of importance, doubtless she would have named it.

CHAPTER II.

THE INDIAN EARRINGS.

He who trusts a secret to his servant
 Makes his own man his master.

DRYDEN.

“**N**OW, Burton, tell me again exactly what he said, and how he looked, poor fellow !” whispered Phoebe Freeth to the worthless woman who had become her *confidante*. The scene was the young girl’s bed-chamber, the time near midnight—a day having passed since the events last recorded.

“He said he would write to you under cover to me, miss, and that, meanwhile, you were to trust in him, as he trusted in you ; and to be

firm, miss, and to recollect that nobody could force you to give him up, if so be as you wouldn't. Still he hoped you would be very careful and cautious not to let them think you much minded, else they'd be leading you a miserable life, and it a'most broke his heart to think you were suffering on account of him."

"Did he say that, the darling? But you must tell him, the next time you see him, not to be anxious about me, for I really don't much mind. Only it is provoking to be treated like a child, and watched and suspected. I declare my eldest sister has hardly let me out of her sight the whole day—taking me out driving and shopping with her, till she bored me to death. Just because she happens to be married, she thinks she can order and preach ten times more than mamma herself; but I won't stand it, that I won't!"

"It is a shame, and that's the truth," said Burton, with mock indignation; "only it would make things a deal more difficult if you did not seem to give way."

"Of course; I am not such a fool as not to know that. But how they can have found out anything I cannot imagine. However, they are driving me to something—they are driving me to it, that they are!"

"And there was one thing besides which Mr. Rawlins said," continued the woman, who had her reasons for not betraying her own eaves-dropping, "that I think I ought to tell you."

"What was it?—what was it?"

"Why, he wanted to know if I would stand by you both faithful—if he got the licence, you understand; if so be he persuaded you to go off, if I would help you to do it."

"And would you, Burton? Would you be faithful to us even then?"

"Yes, that I would. Not that I can see any call for people to know. Besides, I can help you a deal better if they don't suspect me, any way. And you know, miss, I risk losing a good place, all for your sake, as it is. If your ma and pa found out that I took messages and letters,

I should be ruined. A poor servant has but her character, and if it wasn't that I was fond of you, and felt for you, I wouldn't do it."

And here the creature pulled out her handkerchief, and mopped with it the eyes where tears were supposed to stand.

"Burton, you dear good soul, you shall never lose by being my friend, that I promise you. So don't be sorry. Never mind my hair to-night. I can manage it myself. Did you hear lately how the children were?"

"Going on all right, though Master Edward seems now worse with the fever than his sister."

"I am sure I hope I shall not catch it as he has done. They say people often lose their hair after scarlet-fever, and that would be quite dreadful to me."

As Phoebe spoke she was loosening her tresses tenderly and admiringly. Her hair was very beautiful, and there was certainly some excuse for her solicitude.

"Oh! I don't think you need fear, as you don't go near the room. I do declare, miss, your

hair grows longer, and thicker, and lovelier every day. I don't wonder Mr. Rawlins saying it was a net to catch his heart."

"Did he say that? And do lovers always say such pretty things?"

"I am sure, miss, I don't know."

"Well, I should think you must have had lovers. Really you often look very nice!"

At which moderate compliment Burton smiled complacently. But she only said,

"Do, miss, let me put up your hair as usual. I am not a bit tired, and now that you are so lonesome and fretted, I feel more than ever that it is a pleasure to wait upon you."

"Well, be quick, then, for I am frightened to death that somebody should be listening or suspecting anything."

"Oh! we have talked very low, I took care of that."

Burton, however, was soon dismissed; for Phoebe's duplicity was of the hard, cunning, remorseless sort, and she felt herself playing a game in which no needless risk must be in-

curred—no thoughtless act committed—no careless word spoken. She flattered herself that she had “bamboozled” Catherine for the present, and laid at rest all suspicion that the meeting with Cuthbert Rawlins had been pre-concerted; still she had not discovered the tell-tale friend who had revealed the meeting, and in this respect she was at a disadvantage.

Surely a reliable test of what is called love is its influence on the character. Does it purify or corrupt? Does it come as an influx to strengthen truth and all the kindred virtues, or with satanic temptations that break down their barriers? Alas! alas! how seldom will the young learn, except by bitterest experience, that the old are wiser than they, and that the crooked paths of life are full of pitfalls, however pleasant and flower-strewn they may look. Of course Phoebe Freeth was not a high-toned girl, or she would not have entered on a clandestine engagement; and yet she is perhaps deserving of a little pity. She had attracted the selfish regard of a clever, unprincipled man, while she

was only on the threshold of womanhood, even while in her own home she was treated still as a child. By a sort of instinct she had turned for sympathy to trashy literature, such as unhappily is terribly accessible now-a-days to all who have a taste for it. All the better lessons she had received—never, it may be, very deeply imprinted—had faded away, till her whole being seemed merged in the one absorbing passion, which hardened her heart, and sharpened her faculties of cunning and deception. The dangerous illness of her young brother and sister scarcely moved her, except as it might affect her own health and beauty; and as for any pangs her disobedience might occasion her parents, she never realised them at all. Sympathy for the sufferings of others wither away in the malign atmosphere of intense selfish self-will. Deceiver she was, but self-deceiver most of all, for she justified her own conduct to herself, taking for argument the fact of her independent fortune.

Late as it was, the unhappy girl was too much

excited to be sleepy, and after she had dismissed Burton, she drew forth writing materials and quickly covered four sides of notepaper. The letter finished and directed, it was, for safest keeping, put under her pillow ; then she opened a large old-fashioned jewel-box, and took out various ornaments for a leisurely examination. The birthday on which she would be legally entitled to the valuables recently bequeathed to her was now so near that she had been allowed to have possession of them. She had been told that they were worth some hundreds of pounds, but she had only a vague idea of the separate value of the articles. The truth was, she wanted to requite Burton's last services, and bribe her for future ones by some acceptable gift. In this mood she turned over a variety of her treasures. Rings and bracelets seemed alike unsuitable, while a pearl brooch which Phoebe otherwise felt inclined to bestow, would, she saw, be very unbecoming to Burton's swarthy throat, and she was shrewd enough to know that the way to render the woman grate-

ful was to give her something which would make her pleased with herself. There was a gold chain—but then Burton already had one of much newer fashion; a garnet necklace, fifty years old, Phoebe would willingly have spared, but that would be of no use, she thought, to a servant. Of course diamonds were too precious—and a variety of other articles were too pretty to part with, so that with her riches Phoebe felt the proverbial “embarrassment.” However, at last she kept out a curious pair of ear-rings, which she did not particularly admire, but which appeared to her just the thing to bestow. She did not know that their quaintness was a style of oriental workmanship which the *cognoscenti* would have recognised at a glance, and that the half-cut green and red stones, which beside brighter jewelry looked a little like sleepy eyes, were in reality emeralds and rubies of considerable value.

Laid in a pretty little box, and safely embedded in cotton wool, which set them off immensely, the ear-rings also were placed under Phoebe

Freeth's pillow. And after a while the young girl slept soundly, without even a dream of the net she was weaving, to entangle and draw into sorrow nobler hearts than her own.

In the upper rooms, the fond mother and faithful nurse Janet kept watch and ward over the fever-stricken children; and in a near chamber her sister Jane, a little wakeful from loving anxiety, had fitful dreams of sweet music, and was utterly unconscious of the barrier of concealment which had grown up between Phoebe and herself. Never were two sisters more opposite; and yet they had been brought up under the same general influences, and had rarely been parted for a day.

In the morning, when, according to custom, Burton entered Phoebe's room, there was a half-whispered confidential communication between them, and both letter and little box passed into the receptacle of Burton's deep pocket.

Many times in the course of that day, her fellow-servants noticed in her a certain air of importance, of conscious dignity, combined with great

affability, for which they could not altogether account. In the afternoon she was "spared" for an hour or two, being suddenly seized with great anxiety about a friend who was in trouble, "otherwise she would not have asked to go out on any account just now, with the dear children so ill." Whatever else she did, she executed Phoebe's commission, and then, on her own account, she had her recent present duly valued, for Hannah Burton was one who always appraised her possessions according to their intrinsic worth. She hated "trumpery;" and was incapable of attaching sentiment to a glass bead or a cluster of roses. The judge behind the jeweller's counter—a person to whom she was known—examined the earrings with his lens, and tested them with acid, and then pronounced the gold almost unalloyed, and the gems of purest quality.

"You are certain they are real?" asked the owner.

"Quite certain. It is the Indian cutting I see that makes you doubt. To be sure they are

not everybody's money; and I could not pretend to give you what perhaps they are worth. I might keep them for years, you see, till somebody took a fancy to them."

"Oh! I don't want to sell them," replied Burton; "I only wanted to know if they were real right down good."

"Just so—that was what I understood you to say at first. And you may rest quite sure that they are fit for a duchess to wear."

And after she returned home, Burton was a trifle more dignified and more affable:

CHAPTER III.

HUSBAND AND WIFE COMPARE NOTES.

Man is content to know that he is loved,
 And tires the constant phrase "I love" to hear ;
 But woman doubts the instrument is broke,
 Unless she daily hear the sweet refrain.

W. W. S.

INCESSANT occupation of mind and body was certainly coincident with the growth of Hubert Freeth's worldly prosperity. It was in fact a penalty he paid for his success, though only quite lately had he begun to feel it as such. Often had he been absent from home for weeks at a time, hurried hither and thither, hundreds of miles, just to see with his own eyes something no subordinate could quite accurate-

ly describe, or to have half an hour's conversation with a provincial magnate, or to take part in some public affair, or attend a scientific gathering, which would have been considered incomplete without his presence. Thus it happened that his absence was prolonged till the little fever-stricken children were pronounced convalescent.

Of course he had been informed of their illness, which, however, had never been sufficiently alarming to recall him to London; and when he came home, the usual family routine seemed likely very soon to be restored. It was true that Mrs. Freeth still maintained many quarantine regulations; and not without taking several precautions, did she pass the prescribed staircase boundary, to greet her husband. Never had she been more glad to welcome him home, and to have her responsibility shared; but never also had she been so indifferent to Mr. Freeth's narrative of his business success and much fêting. He told her of the manner in which he had been mentioned by a noble chairman on the

occasion of a dinner given in his honour, and of the enthusiasm of a village which greeted him with waving flags and music, in mark of the gratitude of a population whom his work had made prosperous; but Mrs. Freeth was not stirred, saying little more than "I am so glad people were kind." Yet the circumstances related gained importance when she observed dates, then she remarked, "Ah! that was the very day Lucy was at the worst, and Dr. Roche came a second time;" or, "That was the night I never slept at all, when poor Teddy was delirious."

Hubert Freeth smiled on his wife with great tenderness; he loved his children dearly, and was the sort of man that, had circumstances demanded it, could have personally tended them in their illness—perhaps as devotedly as their mother had done. But no such need had arisen, and he recognised with a sort of grateful approval the division of their duties, even though his wife did seem careless of his triumphs. It even passed through his mind that if his Bessie

remarked that she was looking worn and old, and people do not age before their time without a reason. But, except of her failing sight, she did not complain. A thorough woman, with the true humility that belongs to such a character, she also had that strong yearning for consideration and esteem, which is no less a feminine attribute. And if this union seem a paradox, it is a thin-shelled paradox that contains a great kernel of truth and fact. Of course she did receive much consideration, and won much esteem from her friends and acquaintances ; but, diffident of her own merits, she laid it all to the account that she was Hubert Freeth's wife. This was no pain to her—rather was it a justifiable pride ; but, oh ! her heart ached and pined for words of praise and love from her husband's lips—such words as, in the days of obscurity and narrow means, had seemed to be rich music that told of hope and joy, that lightened care, and bid the sunshine stream in around her. Was it, she asked herself, that he had now no time for the consideration of such

trifles as her pursuits and inclinations?—or was it that, brought into close comparison with more accomplished and fascinating women, she had sunk to a lower level than formerly in his estimation? Whenever she inclined to the latter opinion, the demon of jealousy was very near, in readiness to torment and tempt her.

It was a mournful proof of the invisible barrier which had grown up between them, that Hubert Freeth had not the remotest idea of the source of his wife's discontent—a discontent which was sometimes, though not often, apparent. He did not seem to understand how a woman, surrounded by every earthly comfort, could still want something which no money could bestow.

She wanted the glad look, the pet names, the indescribable minute evidences that she was still the first object of her husband's regard. Strange that, through the long years of struggles and poverty, her faith in his love had never waned; but the conflict of feelings which had latterly sprung up raised a mental mist, which

made her see many things in a distorted form, so that she had grown to think her Hubert's professional success and the world's applause were her own formidable rivals.

"It is a most unlucky thing to have happened just in the height of the season," observed Hubert Freeth, when he had listened to the details of his children's illness; "people don't like coming to a pest-house, and I sadly want to give three or four dinner-parties. Don't you think they are well enough to be packed off to Brighton or Hastings, and then we might have the whole house properly disinfected."

"Not yet awhile, I am sure," said his wife; "and, oh! Hubert," she continued, "it does seem so hard for me to be sent away directly you come back!"

"My dear, I am not dreaming of sending you away. Surely you could trust two little children with Janet?"

"If I could trust them with anyone after such an illness, of course it would be Janet," replied Mrs. Freeth, with a sigh; "but I cannot

bear the thought at all. It seems so hard not to have you and the poor children together. I declare it is just like the ladies in India, who have to send away their children, or part from their husbands."

"A very mild imitation of their trial!" exclaimed Mr. Freeth, with a smile, not altogether displeased at his wife's reluctance to leave him. "But really, Bessie, there is not the least occasion for you to go away. Teddy and Lucy dote upon their old nurse, and would be quite happy with her."

"Yes, quite happy; but I think it is too great a responsibility to put upon her. Oh! those horrid dinner-parties!—they are always in the way of something or another!"

"It seems to me something or other is always in the way of the dinner-parties," retorted Mr. Freeth, "but I must have them, nevertheless."

"If you say so, of course you must."

Unhappily, temper was rising in both; but Hubert Freeth had good feeling enough to make large allowance for the strain of anxiety

and want of rest through which his wife had lately passed, and considered that the best way of pouring oil upon the troubled waters was altogether to change the conversation.

"By-the-by," he exclaimed, "have you seen much of Raybrooke since I have been away?"

"He was here about a fortnight ago—yes, it was the day Catherine went to Court, and the day the dear children became seriously ill. Of course I did not see him. He has inquired at the door several times, and sent his servant often, but has really never made a visit since. He could not be hurt at my not seeing him under the circumstances?"

"Oh! of course not; but I expect by this time our friend is Sir Algernon. I heard yesterday that Sir Richard had had a fatal seizure, and was really on the point of death."

"Then, besides being a baronet, he will come into a great fortune, will he not?" said Mrs. Freeth.

"I believe so."

"I am so glad," returned Mrs. Freeth, "for I

like him very much. That is to say," she continued, with a sigh, and as if from an after-thought, "I am glad, if the great fortune makes him happy. I don't think money brings happiness in all cases."

"Oh! Raybrooke will like the fortune, never fear," cried Mr. Freeth.

"I daresay he will; and I should think he would be sure to marry," continued the lady; "he is so gentlemanly, and so clever, and so nice altogether, that he will be what people call a capital match."

"If only Phoebe and Jane were a little older," said Mr. Freeth, laughing, "I should accuse you of having designs, and being a match-maker."

"Oh! Hubert, how can you say such a thing? I would not be a match-maker for all the world. And it would be horrid to put any such idea into the heads of mere children; though really, for that matter——"

"Jane is nearly the age," exclaimed Hubert Freeth, "that you were when we engaged our-

selves, and Phoebe very little younger than you were when we married. I did not remember our own courtship at the moment."

"That was not at all what I was going to say," remarked Mrs. Freeth, gravely. "I was going to tell you a little trouble in connection with Phoebe. I cannot say I have seen anything myself, but Catherine is of opinion that that good-for-nothing Mr. Rawlins has been talking nonsense to her—in fact, that something very like a flirtation was going on while I was away."

"Oh! but that is very serious, for the fellow is a thorough scoundrel. I thought he was forbidden the house."

"Yes, we have been denied to him ever since you said he must not be admitted; but I believe he was here many times while I was at Five Oaks. I don't exactly know what Catherine fears, or what she may have found out through the Brindleys, for she seemed very disinclined to worry me about the affair; only I know she suspects something."

"I should like to speak to Catherine on the subject," cried Hubert Freeth. "She must have some reason for her suspicion. No power on earth would make me consent to my daughter's marriage with such a man. And that god-mother's fortune, if it got wind, might make her a prey to the hawks of society. We really must take care of the girl."

"Catherine has taken great care of her, I assure you; going everywhere with her all the time I have been nursing the poor children. But Phoebe is not easy to manage—that I found out long ago; and since she has known about the fortune she has shown a will of her own more than ever."

"Confound the fortune, if it is to make her headstrong and disobedient!" said Mr. Freeth, with emphasis, and even agitation; "but, after all, we may be distressing ourselves unnecessarily. I cannot believe that one of our daughters would deceive us. It would be a bitterness indeed to think it. In my opinion, the best plan will be to ignore the thing altogether."

Keep the girl to her studies, and give her some amusement, and then, if she has any silly ideas in her head, they will get driven out."

"That is just what I think," replied the wife, "only I felt I must tell you what had passed."

"Quite right—quite right."

"Catherine has proposed taking Phoebe with her to Five Oaks when she goes home," continued Mrs. Freeth, "but I cannot say Phoebe is much pleased with the invitation."

"If Catherine will have her for a month or two, it will be the best arrangement under the circumstances."

"Oh! how I wish we had never known that bad young man!" sighed Mrs. Freeth.

"I daresay we never should have known him if Lionel had been drowned in the Cam."

"Oh! Hubert, how can you talk so? But if Lionel had never gone to Cambridge he would not have had that boat accident."

"True; but if we hark back in that manner, where are we to stop?"

"But, Hubert," pursued the mother, "are you

satisfied with Lionel now? Is he getting on at last?"

"Well, yes, I hope—I think he is; and there is very little excuse for him if he disappoints us. I declare grown-up children seem to cause as much anxiety as the babies."

"And yet how we used to talk of our hopes of seeing them grown up! It seemed the only thing to live for."

CHAPTER IV.

JENNY CANNOT BE TREATED AS A CHILD ANY
LONGER.

What wealth can buy or art can build
Awaits her ; but her cup is filled
Even now unto the brim ;
Her world is love and him !

WHITTIER.

THREE weeks had passed rapidly away. The invalid children had been "packed off" to Hastings in charge of the old nurse, Janet Gillespie ; Telford House had been thoroughly disinfected ; and the "horrid" dinner-parties had been given. The London season had culminated, and though Reuben Appersley would remain in town for awhile, his wife was planning a more

speedy return home. It was arranged also that her sister Phoebe was to accompany Catherine to Five Oaks, and be her guest for at least a few weeks. The young girl now talked as if she were pleased with the project, and practised dissimulation so well, that no one suspected the extent of her deception.

It was an hour or so after breakfast, one of those delicious June mornings, when, even in the heart of London, we are swayed by the glory of Summer, and when "sensitives" must indeed be bowed down with care if they do not feel exhilarated, and almost happy in mere existence. Mrs. Freeth was busy about household arrangements; Reuben taking a solitary late breakfast; Jane was practising a duet with Miss Otway; Phoebe reading, or seeming to read; and Catherine was writing to her mother-in-law a full account of various small events which she knew would interest her. Hubert Freeth had opened his letters, and glanced at the newspapers, and it was nearly the hour when he usually started for his office. Nearly, but not

quite, for Mr. Freeth was very methodical in his habits; perhaps it was the secret of his great working power. And any one intimately acquainted with the ways of the house would have known that this was just the moment in the four-and-twenty hours when he would be most likely to be found at home and disengaged. Therefore the visitor who now sent in his card, and was subsequently ushered into the pleasant library, was, at any rate, fortunate if, as from his manner appeared to be the case, it was the master of the house he especially wished to see.

This unexpected visitor, much grown in manliness, grown even somewhat in stature since we knew him first as a young midshipman, was Lieutenant Raybrooke, brother of the new Baronet, Sir Algernon. Already he had won the character of a brave and clever and zealous officer, yet as he crossed the threshold of that room he felt something which to his own heart he called cowardice. His voice actually trembled as he asked pardon for his intrusion at so early an hour; then, when Hubert Freeth endeavoured

good-naturedly to put him at his ease, he faltered in his set speech; and finally, with real abruptness, made it understood that he came to offer his hand and heart to Jane Freeth, and to seek her father's sanction to pleading his cause.

Mr. Freeth was absolutely astounded. It is true that only the other day he had begun to see that his young daughters were no longer children; but the idea of his little Jenny, not yet seventeen, being wooed in this earnest and highly orthodox manner, was something strange and startling—even a little comic.

"Pardon me," exclaimed Mr. Freeth, "if I know not what to say. She is such a child—can never have thought of marriage, I am sure."

"I too am young," said Frank Raybrooke, "and I do not ask to be married immediately. In fact, my brother thinks we ought to wait a year or two."

"I am glad to hear your brother knows of this attachment," said Mr. Freeth; "for, as you yourself, say you are very young."

"Oh, yes, Algernon not only knows of my

attachment, but I have his best wishes for my success. I have even a message from him, but I hate talking of money."

"It is sometimes necessary to speak of it," said Mr. Freeth. "I cannot pretend to make objection to yourself, or your family, or your noble profession, though it has its pains and penalties, but I will be frank with you and say, I wish something like affluence for my children."

"My kind brother has foreseen that very natural wish. Certain deeds are now in preparation, by which he makes over to me quite two thousand a year; I have besides a patrimony of a few hundreds a year, and I trust to rise in the Navy. I hope you will not think me altogether impertinent in my proposal?"

"Impertinent? Certainly not; and it would ill become me," added Mr. Freeth, "to treat your proposal other than quite seriously. But do you know that Jenny is not yet seventeen—that she is still under the care of a governess? Why, I hear what the girls call 'practising,' not playing, going on at this moment. It

makes me smile at the position, I assure you."

"I know she is very young, but I will wait a year or two, if you wish it. All I ask at present is, that I may have opportunities to try and win her love."

"Had you not better delay this step a little longer," said Mr. Freeth, "till you are sure that your regard is something more than a boyish fancy."

"It *was* a boyish fancy a year ago," replied the suitor with some dignity, "it is a man's strong love now. I have to leave England on a long cruise in a few weeks, and I want to plead my cause at once—to-day, if you will let me."

Hubert Freeth had had many a surprise in his life, but hardly ever so great a one as the present. To the end of time I suppose parents will be astonished, and wake as it were with a start, when they find that their children have passed out of the charmed circle of dependence, and stepped forward to take their places in the foremost files of life. Even though, theoretically, the

parents are ready to admit that childhood is past, they do not quite realize the fact till events loudly and undeniably proclaim it.

Mr. Freeth did not answer Frank Raybrooke's last words very promptly. But after a few moments he said,

"Then you really wish to see my daughter to-day?"

"Indeed—indeed I do."

"But I must speak to her mother, and we must prepare her."

"Oh! pray plead for me with Mrs. Freeth," exclaimed the young man, "if she raises objections. But Algernon says she is all goodness and kindness; and I hope I need not fear opposition from her."

"I should like to speak to her privately," said Mr. Freeth, "and prepare my wife for this little surprise, so perhaps you will amuse yourself with the newspaper for a quarter of an hour, if I leave you."

"I will try," said Frank, with a smile; "but

as you are mighty, be merciful, and remember my suspense."

If Mr. Freeth had been "astounded" by Frank Raybrooke's proposal, some yet stronger and superlative word is needed to express his wife's astonishment when the circumstance, with all its details, was made known to her. Yet she was not stricken dumb, as it is popularly supposed people are by surprises—on the contrary, she became decidedly voluble, though chiefly in the interjectional manner.

"Jenny!—our Jenny!—really such a child! I feel inclined to rub my eyes, to make sure, I am not dreaming. But she is too young, much too young to think of such a thing—it will only unsettle her; and yet—and yet it is what every-one would call an excellent match."

"That is just what I feel. After all, many a girl has married at seventeen, and done very well too; and, besides, there is no talk of an immediate marriage. I believe you had better speak to Jenny, and then, if she consents to see him, I will ask him to dinner; and he can come

an hour before the time, if he likes. Luckily we shall be quite alone."

And on this mission Mrs. Freeth entered the drawing-room, and interrupted the "practising." How she broke the tidings she had to tell is not precisely recorded, but in less than ten minutes Mrs. Freeth returned to her husband in a state of even heightened astonishment.

"Oh! Hubert," she exclaimed, "we cannot treat Jenny as a child any longer. Of course she is going to accept this young man."

"Why, what did she say?"

"Very little. At first she turned pale, then flushed to crimson; and when I drew her towards me, she burst into tears, and buried her face in my bosom. Of course I told her everything you said; and the long and the short is, that she will see this Frank Raybrooke whenever we like. Really, if she had been twenty, she could not have behaved better. Though agitated, as I have told you, at first, she soon became composed, and even dignified, with something of Catherine's grand manner."

"I have often thought her like Catherine," observed Mr. Freeth.

"Yes, I know you have said so; but I never saw it till to-day. She is a little like her certainly, and a darling child, but she will never be so handsome as her sister."

"I don't know. Wait till she is twenty before quite deciding that question."

"Well, Hubert, what are we to say to this young man? I suppose I ought to see him?"

"Yes, certainly; and I think the best plan will be for you to take him upstairs to Jane, without more ado. It is better to get the first interview over at once, instead of keeping the girl in a state of agitation for hours. But mind you, I will not have a positive engagement just yet—they are much too young. Only, as really there is no objection to make, we must let him see her. But women can manage such matters better than a man. I will just go and tell him that he is left in your hands. Then I must instantly be off. I have an appointment at the office, and ought to be there already."

Years have passed since that bright June day, but the memory of it is still fresh in many hearts. To the young lovers it was indeed a day of days, of which each hour had its own beautiful stirring history, that made a picture on the mind in all the radiant colours that love can borrow from youth and hope, and which neither time nor circumstance can obliterate.

Mrs. Freeth arranged the interview between the young people with much propriety, and yet consideration; and then relieved her own feelings by telling Catherine and Miss Otway all that had happened. Reuben and Phoebe were also enlightened, and, really, before luncheon time, affairs had gone so fast that Jenny's new position seemed a recognised fact by all the family. Of course the young sailor remained for that sociable meal, for they could not tell him to go when the gong sounded; and of course he accepted the invitation to dinner, not tearing himself away to write to his brother—who was just now at Raybrooke Park—until late in the afternoon. Hubert Freeth came home

earlier than usual that day. The event of the morning was decidedly uppermost in his mind, so, for once, he left as much "work" as he possibly could to subordinates. He soon perceived that all the family were aware of what had happened, but it was from his wife that he heard little details.

"Really, Hubert," she exclaimed, it seems like a dream!"

"My dear, you often make that observation," interrupted Mr. Freeth; who was a good deal more fastidious about his wife's little mannerisms than he was about the stock phrases of other people.

"Do I?" she replied; "well, at any rate, you know what I mean by it. All this has come upon us like a thunderbolt—yet I declare to you, to see those two young things together, you would think they had been engaged for three months at the very least."

"But I told you, Bessie, that I would not have a positive engagement."

"It is easy to talk in that way," replied the

lady; "but I should like to know what you call a positive engagement? When I spoke seriously to Jane on that subject, she looked me full in the face, half laughing, half crying, and said, with a sort of mock gravity, 'Dear mamma, if Frank likes to marry anybody else, he may; and I am sure if I change my mind I shall say so; I hope papa will be satisfied with that arrangement.' Now, Hubert, could you have made any answer to that?"

"Upon my word I don't know," said Mr. Freeth, laughing, "but really they seem to be having it all their own way."

"But their own way is nothing to object to, after all. And, do you know, he wants us all to go down to Portsmouth, that he may show us over his ship, and give us luncheon on board."

"Well, you can go if you like."

"Hark! there is a double knock and ring," exclaimed Mrs. Freeth. "How late it is for visitors!—and I have got to dress for dinner."

"Perhaps it is young Raybrooke, come an hour before the time," said the husband, laughing; and his guess was right.

Frank was shown into the drawing-room, which was tenantless—save that to him it was filled with happy memories, from the night of the children's party until now. At the Antipodes he had remembered that room, and under the scorching sun of the tropics he had thought of its pleasant shade, and the one dear face associated with it. No outward thing was changed, only his heart seemed to have expanded, and to have become capable of receiving unbounded happiness.

One by one the ladies of the family came down "dressed for dinner," Phoebe being the first who made her appearance. In fact, she rather hurried her toilet when she heard accidentally that Frank had arrived—expressing an anxious desire to see her brother-in-law that was to be.

Phoebe and Jane usually dressed precisely

alike, and to-day they wore a pretty, light fabric suited to the season. But Jane was perhaps a little too nervous to dress quickly—or else a little too shy to enter the drawing-room prematurely. If Phœbe had really the design of preventing a *tête-à-tête* between the lovers, she might have spared herself the trouble, for Catherine was in the drawing-room long before Jane appeared. Jenny's simple toilet was either very becoming, or the heart's awakening had called into life some hidden germs of beauty, for never had she looked so radiant. And kind and loving hearts could not help but bask in the reflected rays of youthful happiness.

As for Frank, not being in the least ashamed of his love, and not seeing why, in the present select family circle, he should hide it, he hung over the back of the low chair in which Jane was seated without any remorse; and brought his lips within six inches of her ears, without really seeming to be guilty of the vulgarity of

whispering. Also there must have been a singular unobserved feat of legerdemain executed during the pre-prandial half-hour, for when Jenny sat down to dinner she wore a beautiful ring, set with turquoise and diamonds, that had never been seen on her finger before.

Truly the next few weeks were a delightful time to the youthful lovers, when all the threads of life seemed gathered up into one "knot of happiness." Oh! how vain and fallacious to the core is that theory that mystery and concealment, difficulties and opposition, give zest to an attachment! Why, they are the evil atmosphere, which blights and withers the fairest buds of promise!

No; it is when friends approve, and conscience at every point is satisfied, that the fresh pure love of two young hearts creates an Eden, sanctifying the common things of life, and raising little joys to ecstasy. As ditch-water to the fabled nectar was that something which Phœbe had tasted and called Love, in comparison with the heart-union—of which they were neither

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ashamed nor afraid—which bound Jane Freeth and Frank Raybrooke in bonds from which there was to be no earthly divorce.

CHAPTER V.

PHEBE AND JANE.

For who more blessed than youthful pair removed
From fear of want—by mutual friends approved.

CRABBE.

THE excursion to Portsmouth duly took place, all the ladies of the Freeth family and Gilbert, now at home for the holidays, being of the party. The weather was perfect, and railway trains fitting in charmingly with all desired arrangements, the day was essentially one of pleasure, without even Mrs. Freeth experiencing overpowering fatigue. But we know that, to the jaundiced eye, all things are discoloured, and, in like manner, to the diseased mind's eye

fair sights seem foul. Perhaps no evil passion is more capable of distorting the mental vision than that vice of ignoble souls—envy, coupled, as it generally is, with selfish and wounded vanity; and the wretched girl, Phoebe Freeth, was too much corrupted by self-will, self-love, and a course of deception, to feel any reflected rays—to take any real pleasure in the happiness of another, even though that other were her own young sister.

In truth, Phoebe had become a most accomplished hypocrite, aided not a little in her downward career by the subtle influence of the worthless woman Burton, to whom, by very slow degrees, she had absolutely grown to look up for guidance and advice. Evil-doing yokes us with companions more “strange” and terrible than unprovoked adversity ever encounters, and the moral deterioration which had ensued to Phoebe from her making a *confidante* and companion of such an arch-traitress was simply incalculable.

The little party had arrived in London from

Portsmouth between eight and nine o'clock in the evening, and Phœbe, pleading fatigue and sleepiness, retired at once to her room. In reality she was longing to see Burton, to ascertain if there was any secret message or letter for her, and to pour out in speech to a sympathising listener some of her pent-up feelings.

"There! shut the door!" she exclaimed, as the woman followed her into the room, ostensibly to help her off with her mantle and put away her hat. "Oh! I am so glad to be at home again. I never was so sick of anything in my life! But tell me, have you seen *him* to-day?—or is there any letter for me?" she added, dropping her voice almost to a whisper.

"Yes, miss, that is why I came up without waiting for you to ring," replied the woman, drawing a letter from her pocket. "I thought you would like to have it at once."

"That was right and kind of you," said the young girl, opening the letter eagerly. "What should I do without you? I don't feel there is another soul I can trust."

"La, miss ! But I am sure it is the greatest pleasure to serve you."

The letter, though apparently satisfactory, was but short, so that Phoebe's perusal of it scarcely interrupted the dialogue, and Burton continued—

"I think, though, you are quite right not to trust anyone. Parents have such awful power over their children who are not of age."

"The laws are shameful, and ought to be altered," cried Phoebe, with the utmost gravity. "It is horrible tyranny forbidding the banns, and refusing a licence, and all the rest of it; and then pretending one is not old enough to judge for oneself—such rubbish ! Why, there is a proof at this very time in our family that age has nothing to do with it, if only we happen to like somebody with plenty of money."

"You may say that, I am sure," said Burton.

"I hope I shall never pass such another day as to-day has been," continued Phoebe; "to see one's own younger sister made such a ridiculous fuss about, and treated with a sort of dignity

as an engaged girl, was really enough to provoke anyone. A chit like that to be treated like a sort of queen, everybody thanking *her* lover for the charming day they had had, and knowing it was on her account it had all been done—grand luncheon on board, and everything. Only I happened to be downright hungry, or I think I should have choked.”

“Don’t you fret ; you are an engaged young lady too, and with a much nicer lover, in my opinion. Besides, sailors are so fickle, perhaps he’ll break her heart yet. I don’t know anyone like Mr. Rawlins, that I don’t, and he’s such a kind gentleman. It is a cruel, horrid shame that he should have enemies who set people against him.”

“Even my brother Lionel, whose life he saved, never sees him or writes to him now. Such ingratitude ! But it only makes me more indifferent to my own family. When I do take *the step*, there will be very little to regret. Meanwhile, you dear, good soul—I know you will do all you can for me. As for ever seeing

him again till I go to him for good, I don't believe I shall, for they all watch me as a cat watches a mouse, and I am worn out and miserable from having to be always on my guard. It would be so nice to be able to talk to other people as I talk to you, but I feel that I dare not trust anyone."

"You had better not—indeed, you had better not!" cried Burton, in a tone that a little betrayed her alarm at the mere suggestion.

"I know that. I felt my way, just ever so little, one day with Mrs. Brindley, talking about the control of parents, and marrying for love, and so on, and I found it would not do. Once I thought she might have helped us, for I am sure, when she was keeping house here, she did everything to encourage him. But I understand it all now."

"Do you really?" said Burton.

"Yes; once I fancied she would have liked Lionel to fall in love with her daughter, but latterly I think she has had grander notions, and she had heard Mr. Rawlins was connected

with the nobility, and she did not know of his troubles ; and my belief is, that she thought at first it was Aline he came to see."

"Mr. Rawlins had better taste."

"Now, Burton, don't you pay compliments."

"I am sure, Miss Phoebe, I am only saying what I think."

"Well, well, there is no denying Miss Brindley is an attractive girl—all the more ought I to be grateful for being preferred. And then he is so well-connected, he might really have looked much higher. I can see that mamma and papa think ever so much of the brother of a baronet, and yet they despise Mr. Rawlins, who is own cousin to an Earl. People are so inconsistent !"

"It is one comfort, Miss Phoebe, that your present life is not going to last for ever."

"You may say that, for I am heartily sick of the tyranny with which I am treated. But the tables will be turned when Mr. Rawlins gets an appointment. And perhaps he will be made an ambassador, or something, and then I shall go

to Court as a much greater lady than either of my sisters."

"And you would look it, too."

"That is not the question. But, meanwhile, it is miserable here. Once I thought it might have been safe to have told Miss Brindley, and she could have helped me so much."

"Could she?"

"Oh! yes, many ways. But I found she had heard the cruel stories about Mr. Rawlins, and quite believed them. She even defended Lionel's ingratitude quite warmly. So, after that, I felt she was dangerous."

"I should think so," exclaimed Burton, with emphasis. "But," she continued, "don't you think, miss, I had better go now, for fear I should be wanted, and for fear it should look suspicious like, my staying so long?"

"Quite right—quite right. Only you might say, what is the truth, that I should like some tea and bread and butter. But ask mamma to let you bring it to me, and then I can talk to you about the packing up, which

ought to begin soon. It will only seem, you know, that I am arranging to go to Five Oaks. So far the idea of that visit is lucky, it will account for my sorting out things. And if my relations make me deceitful, it's not my fault, now, is it?"

"Surely not. They bring it upon themselves, that's what I think. But I'll soon be back with the tea. As you say, miss, it's time to make up your mind what you'll take, and what you'll leave. I've bought a lovely trunk, just what you meant, to-day; and who's to know, when I send it away, as it will appear, to a friend of mine in the country—who's to know, I say, where it goes, or what it contains?"

"Oh! Burton, how clever you are, you think of everything!"

Like passing from some foul and noxious atmosphere to the breath of a flower-garden, or from the din and jangle of discordant noises to the soul-soothing influence of sweet music, is the thought-travelling which takes us away from the vile plotting of Phoebe Freeth and her evil

counsellor, to the presence of "little" Jenny, as the young sailor's betrothed is still often and rather ridiculously called. For she has reached at least the medium height of woman, and every week that has latterly passed has seemed to fling round her some new womanly grace.

The crimson glory of the sunset had faded away into harmony with the deepening twilight, but the evening was so lovely that Mrs. Freeth, with Catherine and Jane, declined having lights in the drawing-room. They had just finished taking their refreshing tea, and were now seated near an open window, chatting about the incidents of the pleasant day. Jenny was on a stool at her mother's feet, but leaning her head rather luxuriously on Mrs. Freeth's lap. Catherine was so near that their hands easily met, and more than once, when the conversation was very earnest, the elder sister clasped the young girl's fingers caressingly, and in token of sympathy.

The street-lamps cast a little light into the room, but still it was quite dusk, too dusk to

trace any expression on Jenny's face, yet the tones of her voice conveyed all needful assurance to her mother and sister, and, as it fell on their ears, made their hearts glad in her happiness.

"Oh! mamma," she exclaimed, "what a wonderful world it is, and what happiness there is in it! But that *I* should be so happy—that is the surprise! Oh! how good God is to me!"

And the voice suggested that tears, true tears of grateful joy, were almost ready to flow.

"Do you know," she continued, "if there were not the little trial of Frank going away, I should be almost frightened at my happiness. Don't laugh, dear mamma, at what I say, it is really not all nonsense. I should feel that something horrible and dreadful must happen to break the spell."

"Well, my dear," replied Mrs. Freeth, "it is a great comfort that you are not going to grieve about his sailing."

"Oh! I don't quite promise not to grieve."

"Don't you? Then I hardly know what you

mean ; but I do know, Jenny dear, that it makes me very happy to see you so contented with your lot, and the more I see of the young man the more I like him."

"Please, mamma, say 'love.' I should like to hear you say you loved him."

"Well, I daresay I shall love him in time."

"Do try. You would at once if you half knew how good he is. Couldn't you see to-day how he was adored by everybody."

"I think he is very much liked by his captain and the other officers," replied Mrs. Freeth, with a smile ; "but 'adored' is rather a strong word."

"Perhaps it is," cried the young girl, laughing ; "but a weak word would not express what I feel and think. Now, mamma, did not you notice, when he was showing us over the ship, how the common sailors spoke to him ?"

"My dear, their manner was only that of proper respect and obedience."

"Mamma, I shall have to pinch you if you talk in that way. It is my ear for music, I sup-

pose, but if I were blind, I should know all about people by their voices; and I am certain every one of those men we spoke to had real affection for Frank. Oh! I did feel so proud of him; and though at first I rather dreaded seeing so many people, and had made up my mind to be so careful that they should not suspect anything, I am afraid I got off my guard. Now, Kate, you were with me more even than mamma was—do you think anything was noticed?"

"Not disagreeably so, I am sure," replied Catherine; "but you and the lieutenant are not skilful hypocrites——"

"Oh! call him Frank," interrupted Jenny.

"Well, you and Frank, not being skilful hypocrites, did behave a little as if you preferred each other to anyone else; or rather, I should say, he looked the lover. Don't distress yourself, Jenny, you behaved quite properly. In my opinion the affectation of indifference in your position is just as detestable as the other extreme."

“Darling Kate to say so,” cried Jane, with a tight squeeze of her sister’s hand; “and after all, why should I be ashamed?”

“Why, indeed!”

“Only it is not pleasant to be noticed, and perhaps criticised with a sort of wonder what he can see in me. But I’ll try not to mind. Poor fellow, he is to be but a week longer in London before he sails. His brother is coming up from Raybrooke Park, to wish him good-bye.”

CHAPTER VI.

A PARTING.

The bitter word which closed all earthly friendship,
And finished every feast of love—farewell!

POLLOK.

IN three days Catherine was to return to Five Oaks; and about the same time Frank Raybrooke was expected to take leave of his betrothed, and finally join his ship, now under orders to sail for the United States of America. His brother was also in London, and, under all the circumstances of the projected alliance, nothing seemed more natural than for the Freeths to make up a “family dinner party.” The new Baronet appeared to have been excessively engaged, for he had not yet found an

opportunity of calling at Telford House ; but he had taken care that the omission might not appear a slight, by sending a great many messages of apology, and writing a most cordial and gratifying letter to Mr. Freeth, on the occasion of Frank's engagement. However, he accepted the invitation to the hurriedly-arranged little party, and at the appointed hour duly presented himself.

Yes, though he had made personal inquiries at the door during the illness of the children, and had sent many messages, Algernon had never entered the house since that fateful day when Catherine fainted in his presence. It was true that the death of Sir Richard Raybrooke, by which he inherited title and fortune, had given him much business occupation, and called him away from London for a time ; but Algernon was essentially a man who, if he had had the "will" to call, would have found the "way." This coming to dinner was a thing which, for his brother's sake, and for general appearance sake, had to be done ; but Algernon had

made certain determined resolutions, which were not at all likely to be broken in the future.

Old Uncle Thomas had consented to be of the party, when he understood it was to be strictly a family affair—"just the Raybrookes and themselves, and no evening party afterwards," assurances which had been drawn forth by the old man's queries. Jane was somewhat his pet, and he was really anxious to judge for himself of her intended husband.

At dinner Jane sat between the two brothers, old Mr. Freeth and Catherine being their *vis-à-vis*. Algernon's change of style and title a little confused Mrs. Freeth—more than once she called him Mr. Raybrooke as of old, and then apologised for her mistake.

"Do call me only Algernon," he exclaimed. "I assure you I have not got used to the prefix myself yet, and have no wish to hear it from you, dear Mrs. Freeth, or any of your family. Lady Hartrington is the only woman that has ever called me simply by my Christian name since my poor mother died; and, now I come to

think of it, I believe that is one of the reasons I am so fond of her."

It was a natural enough thing among intimate friends to say, but the Freeths all felt that Algernon wished them to accept him already as a "family connection." It was altogether a pleasant and even merry meeting; the old uncle was in great force, and full of anecdotes of bygone days and bygone personages, and the young people present, more especially those just opposite to him, seemed excellent and interested listeners. He remembered having met Algernon on a former occasion, and seemed aware of his intimacy with the family, and perhaps it struck him as a little curious that it should have been the younger brother, the comparative stranger, who had fallen "over head and ears" in love with little Jenny. He did not much wonder at her having been preferred to Phoebe, for though the latter was the more strictly handsome of the two, there was a winning grace, a fearless frankness, quite unallied to boldness, about Jenny that was especially captivating. Bold-

ness and shyness both spring from excessive self-consciousness, and perhaps it is the happy medium in manner which generally shows the unselfish, well-balanced character.

In the course of conversation some allusion was made to Frank's speedy departure, and then Algernon a little surprised them all, except Catherine, by saying that he should accompany his brother.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "I am really going. Frank's captain has invited me to cross the Atlantic as his guest, and the opportunity is too tempting a one to be lost."

"Shall you make a long stay in America?" asked the old man.

"Oh, that is just what I cannot tell," replied Algernon; "and yet I suppose I must stay long enough to see the cities, and see the sights, and know the people best worth seeing and knowing."

"Then that means a sojourn of years," exclaimed the old man; "and as a septuagenarian perhaps I ought not to expect to be here on

your return. And yet I should like to hear your account of the Great Republic, the great experiment in modern history."

"Our friend will perhaps write a book about his travels," observed Hubert Freeth.

"There is no knowing what follies a man may be tempted to commit," replied Algernon; "but unless I feel that I have something to say which has not already been better said than I can say it, I will refrain from pen and ink. Besides that taking notes with all the *malice prepense* of intending to use them, destroys half one's pleasure. And, after all, there have been so many books written about America that it seems almost as much used up as Rome and Naples."

"Not quite," said old Mr. Freeth; "there is this great difference, that the past of Italy is so great and so dazzling that modern aspects are dwarfed by comparison; whereas America seems always expanding, always offering new combinations and astonishing results to the thoughtful observer. Ah, I wish I were a dozen years

younger, then I too would cross the Atlantic, and judge of things for myself."

"And what a reception, uncle, you would have!" exclaimed their host.

"Ah, I have many good friends and correspondents in the States; and this reminds me—would you, Sir Algernon, like some letters of introduction?"

"Oh! very much indeed," replied Raybrooke. "I was just wishing for something of the kind. There is certainly one advantage in having no ties, I can go just where I please. And I mean to see everything—even to go among the red Indians, if possible. I dare say I shall be away for years."

"A time will come," said Hubert Freeth, "when you will grow tired of roving, and want to settle down again in Old England."

"Well, it may be so," answered Algernon, "one never can tell. And, by-the-by, there is something I wanted to say. If any of you would like some shooting next Autumn, do go down to Raybrooke. The place is not by any

means shut up. Poor old Lady Raybrooke is staying there for the present, but she occupies her own apartments, and, in fact, is too great an invalid to do the honours ; the servants, however, would get rooms ready at a day or two's notice, and I should so like you all to know the place. There are some curious old pictures that might interest you, if you care to notice how likenesses crop out. There is one of an ancestor who fell in the Civil Wars that looks like Frank in masquerade!" Then speaking in an under tone to Jane he said, "I'll have it photographed for you ; I think you would like to have it!"

Jenny coloured a little, but she had accepted her position, and thanked Algernon for his intended gift, naturally and sincerely. Altogether it was a sociable meeting, in which the ties of acquaintanceship and friendship seemed drawn perceptibly closer. In the drawing-room, after dinner, Reuben started some political subject to Algernon, on which for a wonder they agreed ; and on the strength of this accordance he uttered

a hearty wish that Raybrooke were in Parliament, and on his side of the House.

"Time works wonders," said Hubert Freeth jocosely; "at any rate, when our friend does return home, I hope he will resume his political career—it is the right thing for a young man in his position."

"As you say, time works wonders," returned Algernon, "and it would be one of the pleasantest things in life to find myself co-operating with Mr. Appersley. But I don't see my way to ratting just yet, and I am afraid Appersley is too staunch in his views to come round to mine."

"Phoebe, what is the matter with you?" asked the old uncle, who was ever a privileged person, accustomed to say anything he liked. "I declare you have scarcely opened your lips all the evening," he continued; "what is the matter, I say?"

"Oh! nothing is the matter; I should have talked had I had anything to say," replied the girl, but there was a certain confusion in her

manner which was not unnoticed by the shrewd old man.

"Nothing to say! why, you used to be always a ready chatterbox. I declare I should have thought you were the engaged young lady instead of Jane. Don't give way too much to reverie, my dear, it's a bad habit."

"Is it, Uncle? Well, what you call reverie is a good deal pleasanter than talking to people who don't care about one." As she spoke, her lip quivered as if there were a conflict of emotions in her mind, among which envy certainly held a place.

The old man took a pinch of snuff, but said no more to Phoebe either about taciturnity or reverie, but he watched the girl more than once, and she puzzled him not a little.

When the time came for guests to depart, Algernon startled his friends by saying,

"I am afraid I must make this my final leave-taking; I have so much to do. I know you will excuse me if I do not see you again. Good-bye—good-bye; God bless you, my very dear friends!"

He shook hands warmly with everyone, and returned a second time to Mrs. Freeth, holding her hand between both of his; and he did the same by Catherine, her husband standing at her elbow. The pressure of her hand was the last he experienced. But Algernon had fought a good fight, and determined wisely and bravely.

CHAPTER VII.

DOWN THE PRECIPICE.

The gates of conscience strong self-will had closed ;
 Their hinges rust with lengthened-out disuse,
 And will not yield to gentle spirit touch
 Of guardian angel near.

ONLY a few hours have passed, and, so far as refreshing sleep was concerned, Phoebe Freeth might as well have remained up all night, for no wholesome rest has been hers ; and now that she is dressed, equipped for walking, before five o'clock in the morning, she has just the haggard look of a girl who has spent half the night in a ball-room.

I wonder if, even at this last moment, no

warning voice sounded in her ear, "Desist—desist!" I wonder if no memory of early lessons of truth and duty made itself felt? I wonder if no home affections tugged at her heart, and agonised her with the knowledge of the pain she was going to inflict? If they did she made no sign. But the truth is, she was under the absolute dominion of an ardent passion, which she had never once so much as attempted to restrain. It had well-nigh stifled conscience, blinded judgment, and by slow degrees worn away maiden dignity and reserve. Still she did retain just enough understanding of the enormity of her present proceeding to be a little more unnerved than she had expected to find herself. Enormity, that is, in the eyes of the world, she would have said, for the persuasions of Cuthbert Rawlins, the pleading of her own inclinations, and the assurances of the false, bad woman whom she had made her *confidante*, had in a very great measure justified her conduct to herself.

Phoebe's room had an eastern aspect, and,

early as it was, the morning sunshine gleamed on to her toilet-table with every moment a broadening band of light. She had hurried her dressing, mistrusting her truth-telling watch, and, being ready for her departure a little before the appointed time, she had a few minutes of dull, anxious waiting. As she saw herself reflected in the glass, she was conscious how ill and worn she looked, and the consciousness did not improve her physiognomy. A new terror was beginning to seize her—the terror that Burton had overslept herself or purposely forsaken her—when the woman—more in *déshabillé* than Phoebe had ever before seen her, and without the formality of a knock, stealthily opened the door.

“Oh! Burton, it's late, is it not?” said Phoebe, in a suppressed voice. “I'm quite, quite ready.”

“Not late, miss, at all, for the clock has not yet struck,” replied the woman. “I wouldn't have been behind time on no account. And I have unchained the hall-door and drawn back

the bolts, so you will be able to slip out in a moment."

"That's right. I suppose everyone is asleep still, and that we are sure not to be heard?"

"Quite sure," cried Burton, in a re-assuring tone. "I don't step as light as you, but I am only in my stockings, and that way one is not easily heard." And as she spoke the woman put forward one of her shoeless feet.

"Then you can carry my jewel-case. In its leathern cover it looks just like a writing-desk. I can manage my cloak and little bag. I hope the nasty stairs won't creak, as they do sometimes."

The stairs seemed better behaved than might have been expected, but a staircase window had been left open for ventilation, and its sash rattled, and its blind flapped noisily in the fresh morning breeze. Phoebe started at the sound, and the next moment the hall clock began chiming the quarters, preparatory to its leisurely striking the hour. In her excited frame of mind the ringing tone of the clock, familiar as

it was to her ears, seemed quite alarming, and she said in an impetuous whisper,

“Oh, Burton, won’t they hear—won’t it waken them?”

“La, miss, you forget the hundreds of times you’ve slept through all the hours’ striking. And you may be very sure that long before that clock struck Mr. Rawlins was waiting outside.”

“Oh, I hope so—else what shall I do!”

“Never you fear!”

On a mat in the hall lay a favourite little dog, named Watch on account of his sharpness and vigilance. But why should he bark because members of the family came down betimes that morning? On the contrary, he flapped his bushy tail repeatedly on the floor, by way of greeting, though without rising from his lair.

Burton was right in her belief that Cuthbert Rawlins would not keep them waiting. Long before the appointed hour he had been within sight of the door of Telford House, but had taken care not to attract the notice of a police-

man who passed him, by any appearance of loitering or mystery.

Stealthily the street door was opened, and Burton looked out; she raised her hand, the signal was enough, and in a few seconds the young man had reached the door-steps. At this stage of the proceedings Burton was very anxious there should be no lingering. She was even a little impatient of Phoebe's leave-taking, and thrust the jewel-case into Cuthbert's hands, receiving, however, from him a minute packet in return. It contained a roll of sovereigns, in fulfilment of a solemn league and covenant.

It was done. Hannah Burton closed the street door as gently as possible; but now the dog grew a little uneasy, whined audibly, and sniffed at the threshold. How the woman hated the faithful animal—how willingly she would have slain it, had she dared! But self-preservation is the first law of such natures as hers, and so she stooped and petted and caressed it. Yet the dog was but partially soothed, as it shrank away from her pats.

Burton, however, was destined to meet with a greater annoyance than the dog's vigilance before she reached her own room. It may be remembered that Gilbert made one of the party to Portsmouth, and ever since that occasion he had been "half-crazed" on the subject of ships and ship-building. The boy engineer—for such Gilbert was—had his head full of certain inventions which he had heard discussed by his elders, and in his youthful arrogance fully believed that he had hit upon some new system of machinery by means of which an enormous rudder could be moved. Gilbert had long been the happy owner of a box of tools, and on the attic floor was a lumber room where the boy kept odds and ends of things. He was a famous amateur carpenter, and mended Teddy's broken toys to perfection; but just now he had a higher aim than the mere repairing of injury.

Among his little brother's unused playthings was a ship, in such a doleful plight that a nursery story had been invented to account for its condition. It was supposed to have had its side

stove in by an iceberg, and also to have been wrecked on the Goodwin Sands; likewise its mainmast had been carried away in a hurricane, and the rudder—that was the great point—had been broken and disabled. Gilbert felt that here was an opportunity for an experiment; he would repair Teddy's ship, as a most agreeable surprise against his return from Hastings, and fit it up with the newly-invented rudder. This work had been the chief occupation of the preceding day, but it was by no means finished; and being possessed by one ruling idea, the boy had awakened early, and soon determined to have a good spell of work before breakfast. Therefore it was that when Hannah Burton, in her "stocking feet," crept up the last flight of stairs, she was startled by hearing first the sound of gentle hammering, and then a suppressed whistle.

What was to be done? Burton's plan had been to return to her bed, be half an hour later than her usual time in rising, and then plead that she had overslept herself. But she could

not reach her chamber without passing the lumber-room, the door of which stood wide open ! She had not, however, much time for reflection, for Gilbert, moving about the room in search of some implement, perceived her at the top of the stairs, and instantly exclaimed,

“What ! you up at this time in the morning ! What next, I wonder ?”

“Oh, Master Gilbert, I am not up—that is, to be called up for the day, at all ; but I am almost dead with the toothache, and I have been down stairs to look for a clove to put in my mouth ;” and suiting the action to the word, she raised the corner of the shawl she had drawn round her to her face, and swayed her head backwards and forwards as if in agony.

“Cloves are of no use,” said Gilbert. “Have it out. I have got things here just as good as dentist’s instruments. You sit down and show me which it is ; I’ll draw it in a jiffy.”

“You draw a tooth, Master Gilbert ! How ever can you think of such a thing ?”

“Think of such a thing ! why, I took out two

of Teddy's teeth when I was at home for the Easter."

"That was quite a different thing, Master Gilbert," returned Burton; "but I thank you all the same. Perhaps I am a trifle easier since I got the clove; and I'll go and lie down again for an hour. Not that I haven't slept—I woke just now with the 'scrutiating pain."

"Well, just as you like—but I say have it out. Now look here, Burton, what a capital job I am making! Won't the little 'brick' be pleased to find his ship better than new."

"You're a very clever young gentleman, that's for certain; but I am only interfering and interrupting." Saying which, Burton passed on to her room.

"Clever young gentleman, indeed!" she muttered to herself when her door was closed; "other people need be clever too! The little monster, with his teeth-drawing!"

As for Gilbert, the exigencies of his rudder-making drove Burton's supposed toothache for a while quite out of his memory.

When Phoebe Freeth, perhaps involuntarily, looked back on the closed door of her father's house, no doubt there was a rush of mingled emotions in her heart; but Rawlins was pouring endearing words into her ear, and they stifled any lingering regrets. Her face lost its anxious, haggard look, and flushed now with hope and pleasure.

"Let me carry everything," he exclaimed, attempting to relieve her of her travelling bag and cloak.

"No, no, you take care of the dressing-case, I know how heavy it is. But must we walk?" continued Phoebe; "is no conveyance to be had?"

"I thought it a risk, my darling, to engage anything and bring it near the house," cried Rawlins; "we are not safe for the next four or five hours."

Phoebe knew perfectly well what he meant, but she made no answer.

"Presently," said Rawlins, "we shall be able to take a cab without attracting notice. Ah, there is one," he exclaimed, hailing the driver;

but it was a night cab, which had left the stand and was going home.

Even at this supreme moment of emotion and evil-doing—and perhaps because of the excitement—the young girl was singularly alive to the aspect of London in the early Summer morning. There was something almost weird in the look of the closed houses, as if with a sort of semi-life they slept like their occupants. It was one of those brilliant mornings which weather-prophets declare too bright to last, and the sunshine glittered on the top panes of the tall houses till they sparkled like diamonds. But the streets were at first mysteriously still, at least to Phœbe, who had never before seen them except in the busy hours of the day or night. However, as they proceeded onwards the pavement became more thickly dotted with wayfarers, mostly workmen going forth to the day's toil, or returning from night labour. Mail carts also, to and from the post-office, rattled along, and traders in perishable articles were early astir to reach the markets; and soon shut-

ters began to be taken down, and the town was awakening.

By this time Cuthbert and Phœbe had procured a cab, and were driving fast to an hotel in the heart of the City, where an early substantial breakfast had been ordered to be ready. The waiter supposed it was some male friend coming to London by an early train whom the gentleman expected, and was a little surprised to see a young lady instead. But waiters are so accustomed to strangers, and to circumstances which seem incomprehensible, that their little surprises are very evanescent. The man, however, who waited upon them at breakfast put this and that together, and when, about nine o'clock, they sallied forth, Cuthbert saying they should be back in an hour, the waiter observed to the barmaid that he shouldn't wonder if they were a runaway couple gone now to be married.

"I noticed," he added, "she had no wedding-ring—perhaps I shall be able to see her hand when they come back."

Cuthbert Rawlins had made the necessary preparations for his marriage with unscrupulous cunning. He showed Phoebe the marriage-license, but she was too ignorant of the affairs of life to know that he must have perjured himself to procure it. She thought that any difficulty about the non-consent of parents had been overcome by influence—Rawlins was always talking of his influential friends—or else by money payment.

The beautiful old church to which he was now leading the infatuated girl was situated in the heart of the City of London, not a stone's throw from the hotel where they had breakfasted, and was surrounded by merchants' counting-houses and offices. A century ago rich men, city magnates, lived where their business was conducted, and married and reared families, without, perhaps, wandering a dozen miles from home. Then gay weddings and pious baptisms, with "troops of friends" looking on, were frequent events in the "Christopher Wren Church," and on Sundays its high-

backed, soft-cushioned pews were occupied by parishioners—worshippers more or less devout. Now-a-days the weddings and baptisms are few, and the Sabbath congregations pitifully small. Rich merchants live out of town, and the city parishes are like urban deserts on the Sabbath day. But still the Church Services are performed, however few the worshippers, and there had been no difficulty in arranging for the marriage-ceremony to take place.

And now the appointed morning was come, and the Curate was in readiness to officiate, when the young couple entered the sacred edifice. Hitherto Phoebe had kept up her spirits with a bravery worthy of a better cause, but, as she entered the church, she felt chilled bodily and mentally. She had taught herself to think that she cared not for the support of friends; for her parents' blessing; for a bevy of sympathising bridemaids; for loving looks and encouraging words; for the symbolising white dress and sweet flowers—yet the want of a something which this combination represents

made itself felt in a very agonizing manner, and Phoebe burst into tears.

Cuthbert tried to comfort her with fond words and earnest promises of devotion, and so far succeeded that she was somewhat calmed before they reached the altar. But appearances were so strange that the clergyman thought it his duty to ask very pointedly if they had no friends for witnesses, and to make a short exhortation about the solemnity of the occasion. And when—the ceremony having begun—the stirring appeal was made to conscience, as the pair must answer at “the dreadful day of judgment,” he paused a little longer than is usual.

But there was no audible response, however conscience might sting. The solemnization of matrimony proceeded; it was the bald-headed old clerk who “gave the bride away”—the pew-opener, a widow in rusty black, who held her gloves.

The newly-married pair returned for a few hours to the dingy hotel, where the waiter, in the meantime, had his curiosity gratified. Before

leaving town for their honeymoon there were certain letters to write, which took both time and consideration. More than one production was destroyed as not desirably worded; and finally the statement of facts and entreaty for forgiveness were made with great brevity. Meanwhile, the day had grown lowering; at the railway-station Phœbe's box was found duly booked and labelled, but they started on their journey in the midst of a thunderstorm.

CHAPTER VIII.

THOSE SHE LEFT BEHIND.

Woe is me for my hurt! my wound is grievous; but I said, "Truly this is a grief, and I must bear it."—JEREMIAH, x. 19.

IT is said that sorrows always come "in battalions," and it was bad news which occasioned some slight delay in the discovery of Phoebe's flight. The first post brought a letter from Hastings, in which the old nurse, Janet Gillespie, gave a very unsatisfactory description of Teddy's condition. Little Lucy, she said, had completely recovered from the effects of the fever, and the sea-breezes had brought back the roses to her cheeks; but with her brother

the case was different, and lurking illness still kept him pale and thin. Janet was growing anxious, and wished to be relieved from responsibility by bringing the children home. The Hastings doctor whom she had consulted had admitted the boy was "very delicate," and the phrase had frightened her, remembering his sturdy little frame hardly two months ago.

Mrs. Freeth knew that the little boy had rallied from the fever less favourably than his sister had done, but the present definite account quite unnerved her; her hand shook as she poured out the tea, and she could not refrain from tears. Even Mr. Freeth was visibly distressed, for they both knew that the faithful old nurse would not have alarmed them needlessly. Absorbed in thoughts of the younger children, Mrs. Freeth did not for some little time notice the absence of Phoebe. Suddenly, however, she exclaimed,

"Where's Phoebe?—what can make her so late this morning?"

Of course there was no answer to these ques-

tions, but some one suggested that the gong should again be sounded—perhaps she had not heard the first summons ; and this accordingly was done. But as no Phoebe appeared, the bell was rung, and orders were sent to Burton that she should inquire why Miss Phoebe was not down to breakfast.

The woman was prepared for something of this sort ; she had arranged her part, and was equal to the occasion. Presently she entered the breakfast-room, and said, with the most natural air,

“ I think, ma'am, Miss Phoebe must be gone out ; she's not in her room, or anywhere that I can see.”

“ Gone out !” exclaimed Mrs. Freeth, in anxious amazement ; “ but when did you see her last ?”

“ I have not seen her at all this morning. I wondered at her not ringing, as usual, and when I went up to see if I was wanted,” proceeded Burton, “ I found her door ajar, and that she was not in her room. But don't be

frightened, ma'am," she cried, seeing the mother's distress, and yet not wincing under it—"don't be frightened. Miss Phoebe's not like a little child. I daresay this fine morning she wanted a walk."

"A walk—by herself—at this time in the morning!—surely she would not dare——"

"Hush!" said Mr. Freeth, authoritatively; he was hardly less moved than his wife, but he had more prudence and self-command, and did not wish Burton to guess at their fears. "Finish your breakfast, my dear," he continued, in a softer tone; "as Burton says, she is not a child, to be run over or kidnapped."

But "finishing breakfast" was out of the question for the poor mother—indeed, all the family were agitated by the young girl's mysterious disappearance, and Catherine especially trembled with sad forebodings.

Mrs. Freeth's words seemed to dismiss Burton, but in a few minutes she returned to the room in apparent surprise and distress.

"I have been making inquiries, ma'am," she

exclaimed, "if anybody in the house knows about Miss Phoebe, and she must have gone out quite early; the street door was found unfastened at half-past six. I thought you ought to know."

"Oh! Burton," cried the mother, wringing her hands, "go into her room—find out what she has got on—you know all her clothes."

"I did notice, ma'am, just now," replied the woman, with an assumption of sorrowful gravity. "Miss Phoebe must be wearing her straw bonnet, and pink muslin, and black mantle; and her travelling-cloak is missing—and oh! ma'am, that great box of jewels is gone also!"

By this time chairs were pushed back from the table, and the family group presented an aspect of grief and dismay. Mrs. Freeth had burst into a violent fit of weeping, and Catherine and Jane had tears ready to flow, the latter more from sympathy than anything else, for she was unconscious of the one great cause for apprehension. Hubert Freeth tried to comfort his wife,

but his own heart was torn by a mighty dread, and the consequent wrath which was surging in his mind. Nevertheless he spoke with tolerable composure.

"Gilbert, my boy," he said, "put on your hat and see if you can find your sister."

He did not wish the young brother to witness their grief, or guess at the dark suspicions which oppressed his elders. And Gilbert, of course, was off like an arrow. Burton had also left the room before anything of consequence was said.

"If she is not back in half an hour, I shall have no doubt of her fate," exclaimed Hubert Freeth. "As for the villain who has lured her away, may I have self-restraint enough not to curse him!"

And, as the father spoke, he dashed his clenched hand with such force on the table that the room trembled under the blow.

"Oh! papa, papa, what do you mean?" cried little Jenny.

"Ah! you don't know. I forgot that you were in ignorance of our fears. But, Jenny,

did she never confide anything to you?—never give you reason to think she was deceiving us?”

“Again I say, dear papa, what do you mean? I would not deceive you for all the world!”

“Then you know nothing of this wretched Cuthbert Rawlins?”

“Mr. Rawlins! I have never seen him since the time you and mamma were away. Then, when Mrs. Brindley was with us, he came rather often. She seemed to like him, I thought. But what has Mr. Rawlins to do with Phœbe?”

“Oh! perhaps nothing—perhaps nothing,” exclaimed Mrs. Freeth. “But now I see we were all to blame, to treat what we knew so lightly.”

“Mamma, it was not treated lightly,” said Catherine, mournfully. “I spoke to Phœbe very seriously, when I told her that she had been seen walking with Mr. Rawlins. I warned her as forcibly as I could of your great displeasure, should she be found encouraging him in

any manner. It was she who appeared to treat the affair lightly, as if it were something not worth a scolding. Nevertheless, you may remember that she has never gone out alone since that day."

"And now I see it all," exclaimed Hubert Freeth, in tones of anger and sorrow. "Impatient of wholesome restraint, she has chosen to leave her father's house like a thief in the night. But I cast her off—henceforth she is no daughter of mine!"

"Oh! Hubert! Hubert!" sobbed his wife, "unsay those words!—oh! do unsay them! But, think, is there no way of saving her? Can't the police find her, and tear her away from a villain?"

"What clue have we? It seems to me we must wait till she condescends to enlighten us. However, I will make such inquiries as I can—for your sake, Bessie. But don't blame yourself—Catherine is right, the girl was warned. On her own head be the punishment of her wilfulness."

These were the words uttered—in place of a father's benediction—at the moment that Cuthbert and Phoebe, at the altar of the City Church, had just been pronounced “man and wife.”

Oh! if the misguided girl could but have looked in at that sorrowing group in the familiar room where only yesterday she had sat among them, I think even her selfish, passion-hardened heart would have been stricken with remorse; but she had already passed a great gulf—and never, never more could she be as she was yesterday.

Wearily the hours passed by, and yet they were sufficiently filled up by little events and much occupation. Mr. Freeth telegraphed to Janet Gillespie to bring home the children immediately; and then he assembled the servants, and questioned them minutely, to ascertain, if possible, anything which might throw light on the wretched girl's flight. But no one had anything to tell, and Burton, apparently sorrowful and sympathetic, diverted all suspicion from herself.

Of course it was discovered that a considerable amount of wearing apparel was missing, as well as the jewel-box, and this added to the perplexity of the case. That such a quantity of articles could have been removed without attracting notice, seemed marvellous; and that a child of theirs could have been guilty of the planned cunning the whole proceeding showed, was a bitterness to the parents which perhaps only parents could understand.

If any hope of Phoebe's return home had lingered in their hearts, it was dispelled by the letter which reached them in the evening. It was a joint epistle of the newly-wedded pair, and in it was enclosed a certificate of their marriage. The composition bore a detestable resemblance to the phraseology associated with high-flown romances, in which "all for love and the world well lost," is usually the theme. Even the expressions of regret at the displeasure they feared they had incurred, had no ring of sincerity about them, no traces of tenderness or truth. The letter shocked Hubert Freeth, if

possible, more than the act which it was intended to excuse had done ; and he poured out his wrath in a torrent of angry words. At the moment he perhaps believed what he said, and thought that he had cast a child for ever out of his heart.

As for the poor mother, she wept and prayed and tried to moderate her husband's indignation, and drew round her the other children, as if to gain some solace and compensation from their true love.

It was an hour or two after the letter had been received, and when Hubert Freeth had grown somewhat calmer, that he exclaimed,

"Lionel shall see them—he is the fit person. They say we may address, Post Office, Dover ; and hint at going abroad in a week, unless they are forgiven. I send no forgiveness ; but it is right we should know what is the man's true position, and what his plans are. No doubt Lionel can find them out ; and it was he who brought this scoundrel into the house."

"We should remember he saved Lionel's

life," said Mrs. Freeth. "We should remember that, however bad he is."

"Yes, he saved his life, to be well-nigh his ruin; and now—why, I declare to you, I would rather have seen Phoebe in her coffin than married to such a gambler and swindler!"

"Oh! Hubert, do not talk of seeing her in her coffin!" exclaimed his wife. "We do not know what it is to lose a child."

"She is lost," said the sterner father.

"Not lost, not lost!—she is so young! Oh! Hubert, be pitiful!" reiterated Mrs. Freeth; and though he answered not her entreaties, they did not vex him.

It was the saddest day they had ever known. By the force of contrast, the anxious cares of their early days, the petty troubles that had depressed them, the hardships of poverty, seemed as nought compared with the present anguish. Even the luxuries that now abounded, the sumptuous home, the many servants, appeared a cruel mockery, and something out of harmony with sorrow.

In the course of the morning, Mrs. Brindley happened to call, and was admitted, notwithstanding the family trouble. Mrs. Freeth told of Phoebe's flight; and did not quite refrain from blaming Mrs. Brindley for encouraging the visits of Cuthbert Rawlins during the memorable period when she kept house for her friend. Mrs. Brindley retorted that he was not her acquaintance, but, as she supposed, the friend of the family. "It was unjust, that it was, to accuse her of any complicity in this wretched affair;" and though after a fashion the dispute was "made up," and they shook hands at parting, it was something very like a quarrel that had taken place between the two intimate friends.

The sultry Summer morning, as we know, was followed by rain and thunder, and the strife of the elements seemed in sympathy with the wrestle of conflicting passions and sorrows that was oppressing so many hearts. But the storm was over, the evening fine, when Janet and

the two little children arrived at home. It was good for Mrs. Freeth to have her mind diverted from Phoebe even by a new care.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEWLY MARRIED PAIR.

He lives who lives to virtue ; men who cast'
 Their ends for pleasure, do not live, but last.

HERRICK.

YES, Lionel was the fittest person to track his sister, and more likely than any other to discover with accuracy the depth of her degradation in marrying Cuthbert Rawlins. Hubert Freeth was too practical and clear-seeing in the common affairs of life, to find any comfort in delusions ; and when, in obedience to his father's behest, Lionel undertook the painful mission entrusted to him, he thoroughly understood that his object was to find out every fact

which could throw light on the present position of Rawlins.

"Remember," said the father, "it is the exact truth I wish to know. You have a right to probe with questions, a right derived from me, and I beg of you to impress upon him that there must be no distorting of facts, no glossing over of circumstances."

"There shall not be, if I can help it," replied Lionel; "but many things I may at once tell you—things which I know of my own personal knowledge. To begin with, he is deeply in debt."

"And what are his means of extrication?"

"At present, none," said Lionel, "for I know that he lives from hand to mouth, in the most precarious manner. He disappointed the relative who placed him at College, and who now has cast him off, and I believe he has well-nigh exhausted the patience of all his connections. But he has a wonderful belief in himself, and I really think fully expects some day to obtain a first-rate appointment."

"What is he fit to be?—that is the question," said Mr. Freeth.

"He is fit for many things, if he would but exert himself," replied Lionel eagerly. "Oh, father," he continued, "I wish to tell you literally and exactly all I know and think, and I trust that the bitterness of my own feelings may not make me unjust even to him. Though Cuthbert Rawlins utterly failed at College, he is not a fool, he is even an educated man—indeed a good linguist, so far as modern languages are concerned."

"Picked up orally, I suppose," returned the father, "without real application."

"Perhaps so ; but still they are acquired, and ought to do him service."

"I understand," continued Hubert Freeth ; "I know the sort of acquirements, and the very limited vocabulary which is sufficient to make a show and be the stock-in-trade of such a linguist. But a diplomatist needs something very different. Pshaw ! he seems to me not worth his salt."

"No doubt he would take almost any employment now," continued Lionel; "if he gives any tokens of steadiness, may I—may I hold out the hope that you will use your influence——"

"Certainly not," interrupted Hubert Freeth; "no bargain is fair between those who keep and those who are capable of breaking promises. Why, if he had never done any other bad thing in his life, this luring a girl not eighteen into a clandestine marriage stamps him vile. Besides, he must have taken a false oath about her age. As a father—an offended father—I desire to know the circumstances of my daughter's position; but recollect you are by no means the bearer of pardon or maker of promises."

It is charitable to suppose that the young can be but little conscious of the wide-spreading misery which all evil-doing occasions. No doubt Phoebe Freeth knew that she was making—as the phrase goes—an imprudent marriage; but she argued that was entirely her own affair, that she was only "her own enemy," and that, if she

was prepared "to take the consequences," no one else need complain. She did not realise the anguish she was bringing on her own family, and least of all did she ever imagine what Lionel's poignant regret and sorrow would be.

Arrived at Dover, he discovered the address of the young couple with but little difficulty, and, a few days after the elopement, presented himself at their lodgings, without warning or preparation. Phoebe held up her cheek for the accustomed brotherly kiss, and tried to look as if nothing of any consequence had occurred—but a hot blush belied the apparent calmness. Lionel gave the kiss partly from the force of habit, and partly because he pitied her youth and inexperience, and knew better than most people how specious were the qualities which had fascinated her, but he declined the hand of the man who had been his dear friend, and was a sister's husband.

"I was prepared for your virtuous indignation," said Rawlins, with a sneer, "but if we are

not to be friends, how am I to account for the honour of this visit?"

"I am only my father's representative," answered Lionel, with a sort of sorrowful dignity, "and I come on his part to demand some particulars of your marriage. "How did you procure a licence to marry a minor without her father's consent?"

"I did not know she was a minor," stammered Rawlins. "I never asked her anything about her age; she will tell you so."

"Hush!" said Lionel, "you know your guilt."

"You should not use such a word," cried Phœbe, warmly. "I don't know what you mean."

"But your husband does," replied her brother, "and I will leave him to make his confession. I do not like in your presence to say what he is."

"When a man is as much in love as I was, he will do anything," cried Rawlins.

"At all events, you have succeeded in your scheme," said Lionel; "and now I must inquire

where and what my sister's home is to be?"

"And suppose I decline to answer?"

"I should then have very little more to say."

"Under the present circumstances," returned Rawlins, "that might perhaps be rather desirable. Yet I shall do nothing of the kind—on the contrary, I shall give you a minute account of our intentions. I came to Dover, knowing it was easy to pass hence to the Continent, if impatient, vindictive people forced me to do so; but the astounding intelligence of my darling Phœbe's independence, and her trusting generosity, render such a step unnecessary."

"You say 'astounding intelligence.' Rawlins, on your honour—such honour as I would hope still remains to you—were you ignorant of her fortune?"

"On my honour—yes."

And the practised hypocrite uttered the lie without outwardly wincing. He had learnt many lessons of duplicity at the gaming-table, and one of the first had been to repress the expression of mental emotion.

Lionel was staggered, and at the same time gladdened beyond measure; but before he spoke again Phoebe exclaimed,

“How could he know? I never told him till I was his wife. But I dare say if I hadn’t married Cuthbert, somebody who knew of my money would have pretended to like me, and I should have been made miserable. How cruel you are to be so suspicious!”

“My darling, don’t distress yourself,” interposed the husband; and he added, with an assumed air of frankness, and as if it were a sudden recollection—“You know you did tell me of some jewels which had been left you; but I had no idea they were so valuable as they turn out to be. As somebody said, diamonds make a capital umbrella against a rainy day.”

“Do you know, Phoebe,” said Lionel, “that you had no right to take those jewels away? They ought to have been kept in trust for you till your next birthday.”

“I certainly shall not give them up!” exclaimed Phoebe, with decision.

"That may be," replied Lionel, "because to compel you to do so would make a fresh scandal; but the executors of your godmother's will much regret the mere good-nature and natural confidence in you which prompted them at once to hand you the box."

"I thanked them for their good-nature at the time—I should think that was enough," exclaimed Phoebe; "and I have nothing to do with their regrets. But they could do me a good turn now if they would. I want some money, besides the interest which is to begin next birthday, without waiting till I am of age; cannot they let me have it?"

"Indeed they cannot," replied Lionel.

"Phoebe, dearest," said Rawlins, "don't tease your brother about money matters. I can arrange everything without his assistance. The fact is," he continued, addressing Lionel, "we are not going abroad. This very morning I have received the offer of a Secretaryship to a Company that is being formed, and I mean to accept it. Indeed, we are going back to town

the day after to-morrow, and as soon as we are settled, and see friends, I will take care that you know. At the same time, I do not choose my wife to be scolded and reprimanded, and unless her relations are inclined to make themselves pleasant, they had better keep away. I can understand parents not liking to find themselves outwitted, but, on the other hand, I was grossly insulted, cut dead in the street, and forbidden the house. I would not forego my treasure, and therefore I was obliged to lure it away clandestinely. Why, we had not met for weeks when she ran away, so closely was the dear girl watched."

"That you lured I have no doubt," said Lionel. "For my sister's sake I would not wish to think otherwise. But, oh! Phœbe," he continued, "you must have had some evil counselor, some false friend, who helped you to deceive, and was a go-between. Who was it?"

"I shall not tell," was her reply. "It was no one you are in the least likely to suspect. That is all I shall say."

"And what am I to say at home, Phœbe, as a message from you?"

"I have no particular message," she exclaimed, "except that of course I am sorry papa and mamma are so angry. I should like to be friends, if they would be kind to Cuthbert, and apologise for all their rudeness. But if they don't wish to see us, what can we do?"

"Phœbe, Phœbe, do you know what you are saying?" cried Lionel, with warmth.

"Yes, quite well. I am married now, and my first duty is to my husband. No doubt you meant kindly by coming all this distance to find us out, and I am very glad to see you, but all the talking in the world can't alter anything that has happened."

"I know that painfully well; but the present and future have to be considered," said Lionel.

"We shall do very well in our worldly affairs," resumed Phœbe. "The Secretary's salary and my money will make a sufficient income. We don't want to be rich till we have tried who are our true friends."

"I was thinking of other things besides income," replied her brother. "Oh! Cuthbert," he added, "let the future in *some measure* atone for the past. Surely I have a right to make this appeal to you!"

"Don't preach!" cried Rawlins, impatiently.

"Good-bye," said Lionel, mournfully, and taking up his hat as he spoke. "Good-bye. But, Phœbe, the day may come when you will see many things in a truer light, and regret your present hardness and flippancy. If trouble comes, remember I am still your brother."

"Hardness and flippancy! I don't know what you mean," retorted the sister.

"Good-bye, good-bye," repeated Lionel, and the next minute he was out of the house.

Returning to London without delay, he the same evening described to his father all that had passed, relating everything as much as possible in the character of a peacemaker. But Hubert Freeth, in his intercourse with the world, had found many occasions of unmasking falsehood; he was extremely incredulous of "happy

accidents," "singular coincidences," and "convenient errors," and placed not the slightest confidence on the "word of honour" of such a man as Cuthbert Rawlins. He utterly disbelieved the assertion that Rawlins had been ignorant of Phoebe's fortune.

"Glad, yes, of course I am glad that the fellow has obtained decent employment," exclaimed the father, in answer to some observation of Lionel's. "And if he keeps it, and works respectably at it, there may be a future for him of which we need not be ashamed. Yet what can we hope of a man who could perjure himself to accomplish the marriage? No doubt he will get hold of Phoebe's money, that is to say, raise money on her rights before she is of age; and if it be to pay his debts I shall not complain. We shall see!—we shall see! But his creditors will soon find out that he has married a wife with money, and will give him no peace."

"Yes, tailors and bootmakers," observed Lionel; "but I am afraid Rawlins is deeply involved in 'debts of honour,' betting and gamb-

ling transactions; and besides, he has borrowed money right and left from his friends."

"Did he ever borrow from you?" asked Hubert Freeth, promptly.

"Yes," answered Lionel, "the week after he saved my life. Oh! father, I am glad you asked the question."

"And why was I not told?"

"Because I believed his promise that he would pay me in a few weeks; because I thought it mean to betray his need; and because you had been so generous to me, and I knew what heavy expenses you had just then—forgive me if I did wrong. I did not wish you to suffer."

"I am not angry with you," said Hubert Freeth, mournfully; "I can understand more than you tell me. But that man! that man! And to know that he is Phoebe's husband! I feel that I never really knew trouble until now."

CHAPTER X.

GILBERT'S INQUIRY, AND BURTON'S HOLIDAY.

Small duties grow to mighty deeds,
Small words to thoughts of power ;
Great forests spring from tiny seeds,
As moments make the hour.

FRANCIS BENNOCH.

WHILE Mrs. Freeth was bowed by sorrow and shame at Phoebe's marriage, her heart was torn in a far different manner by apprehensions for her youngest son. It was no idle warning of the Hastings doctor when he pronounced him "very delicate;" it was no unfounded dread on the part of the faithful Janet which had made her anxious to bring the child home. He was ill, very ill—the most

skilful physicians admitted the fact ; and no one could look at the little sufferer, and doubt the gravity of his symptoms.

Instead of rallying, and recovering health and strength, as his sister Lucy had done, the fever seemed to have left seeds of further illness in his system, so that day by day he became weaker. Not that little Teddy was confined to his bed—he was still able on genial days to be taken a carriage airing ; and the aim of the whole family was to nurse and amuse him. It was pathetic to notice that as his little hands grew thinner, and his limbs weaker, the child's mind beamed out more and more brightly. He prattled his innocent thoughts, and asked pertinent questions on many a subject of which his hearers had believed him ignorant, startling them occasionally by the sagacity of his remarks. Sometimes he recited snatches of hymns and little nursery songs, as if his childish memory were called on to pour out its stores. Happily he did not suffer much pain ; but the gradual wasting away was piteous to behold.

How hard it seemed that two such trials as those which now oppressed them should have come upon the parents at the same time! But it may be that each trouble was the more accurately weighed because of the counterpoise of the other. At least, the mother and father were beginning to seek consolation in the idea that, if they must look upon their little one as a lent treasure, it would pass away in the sweet innocence and comparative purity of early childhood. Hubert Freeth had said he would rather have seen Phoebe in her coffin than the wife of Cuthbert Rawlins; and as day after day he clasped little Teddy fondly in his arms, knowing full well that the last hour for holding the frail form was not far distant, he was the better able to say, "Thy will be done," because he had fathomed a deeper sorrow than the death of a beloved child.

It cannot be said that the mother was as yet equally resigned to the death which seemed already casting its shadow upon the house. She bore up bravely in the presence of the

suffering child, but gave way piteously to her grief, sometimes in the company of those who could sympathise with it, and oftener in solitude. The trouble which had come upon the household had induced Catherine to postpone indefinitely her return to Five Oaks; and her mere presence seemed a staff for the sorrowing mother to lean on, and her active help like the aid of a legion.

The brothers Raybrooke had sailed for America; but not till Frank had greatly endeared himself to Mrs. Freeth by his son-like devotion in her sorrow, so that Jenny had had the satisfaction she longed for of hearing her mother say, "I love him." Algernon had called at Mr. Freeth's office, and expressed the warm sympathy that might have been expected from such a friend, but he had not again visited at Telford House.

Gilbert, the school-boy, at home for the holidays, was perhaps learning lessons as useful as any that are conned from books. Of a nature that often overflowed with animal spirits, and

was by no means incapable of mischief, he had still a warm heart as well as a clear head, and was able to understand his parents' trouble better than, perhaps, they imagined. He loved his little brother very dearly, as it is to be hoped "big brothers" often do love the young ones they have carried in their arms, and, it may be, teased and taught by turns. It saddened him more than he had ever yet been saddened to see the little fellow fading away; and there was no sacrifice on his part too great if even for the briefest time he could please or amuse him. How rejoiced he was that he had mended the toy ship, no words can tell; for it had been one of Teddy's favourite playthings, and the child was overjoyed at its renovation, and never wearied of rigging it, and indulging in all sorts of "make-believes" about it, even though its voyages were only across the carpet. It was a touching sight to see Gilbert lending himself to the childish play, and one day, while he was explaining, for the sixth time at least, the mechanism of the rudder, he suddenly thought

of the appearance of Burton that bright morning when he was mending the ship, and with a startling suspicion that was new to him.

But Gilbert was a little gentleman, and the idea of prompting a perhaps unfounded accusation against a servant was altogether repugnant to his feelings; nevertheless, he could not rest in a state of indecision, and with a conscience perplexed as to what he ought to do. Saddened as he might be by the family troubles, he was still but a boy with a reserve of fun at command, and he resolved to venture upon a little "chaff" with Burton, and see what would come of it. An opportunity soon presented itself. Meeting the woman one day on the stairs, the bright daylight streaming full on her face, he extended one arm to the banisters to prevent her passing, and with the other lifted his handkerchief to his cheek, then, imitating her rocking motion that memorable morning, he suddenly exclaimed,

"How is your tooth?"

"Let me pass, Master Gilbert—now pray

do!" said the woman; "I am in a hurry."

"Not till you tell me how your tooth is, and whether the clove cured it."

"Oh! it's quite well now."

"But was it the clove which stopped the pain?" persisted Gilbert. "I want to know, because I had a horrid toothache once, and it would be so jolly to know of a cure!"

"Well, sir, I suppose it was; but what does it signify?—I had forgotten all about my tooth. Do let me pass!"

"In one minute. Now, really, Burton, had you quite forgotten about your tooth, and my kind offer to take it out? It couldn't have been a bad tooth-ache, I am sure, or you wouldn't have forgotten. But don't look so frightened; I couldn't pull it out against your will."

"I'm not frightened—why should I be frightened? Master Gilbert, I'll call out if you don't let me go upstairs directly."

"There, you may go—I am satisfied."

The shrewd boy had watched the woman's

face, and was "satisfied" that it was his duty to make known that Burton was about the house at five o'clock on the morning of Phoebe's elopement. Young as he was, he was conscious that his sister had degraded herself by her marriage, and he felt a brotherly indignation against anyone who had aided and abetted in her wrong-doing. Nay, he was perhaps more absolutely vindictive than his elders, seeing only the plain case of falsehood and deception, and not comprehending the force of a lover's pleadings.

Phoebe's marriage was still so recent that reference was perpetually being made to some of the circumstances associated with it; and without making his communication of undue importance, Gilbert had soon an opportunity of relating the incident of Burton's supposed toothache, and upstairs and downstairs wanderings at an hour when the household were presumed to be still slumbering.

Hubert Freeth started when he heard the tale, and blamed Gilbert a little for not having

told it before. He could not understand how the boy could have forgotten, or failed to remark such an incident. Still the woman had acted her part so well, from the hour when she had first proclaimed the young girl's absence to the present moment, that appearances were in her favour, and it seemed a little unjust to attach much importance to what, after all, was but a trifling circumstance. Still it made an impression, and Burton was questioned about little particulars preceding Phoebe's flight much more than was agreeable to her. To be sure she had an inexhaustible stock of falsehoods ready for use, but she was becoming uncomfortable, perhaps from sheer fatigue at that terrible exercise of memory which is necessary to the practised liar. Her "place" was what is called a good one, with easy duties and high wages; nevertheless she was thinking of giving notice to leave whenever some slight rebuke should offer her the excuse of supposing that she did not give satisfaction.

It was in this mood that she asked for a

day's holiday, a favour cheerfully and instantly accorded; and it was known that by ten o'clock in the morning Burton was out for the day. No one had presumed to inquire where she was going, and she had not volunteered information on the subject.

It was at luncheon that Reuben Appersley asked his wife "what she was going to do that afternoon?"

"I have no engagement," she replied; "I can do anything you like."

"Then let us go to the Crystal Palace, I can drive you in the phaeton. It is high time we chose the dinner-service we want at home, and I hear there is some lovely china to be seen at Sydenham."

Accordingly the phaeton was ordered, and Catherine and her husband departed on the thorough "Darby and Joan" expedition of choosing china. It was a lovely day. The flush of the London season was passing away, but the Summer time was in its prime; the air was soft and balmy, and the sky so veiled with

light clouds that the sun was not scorching. Altogether it was the perfection of weather for driving, and Catherine, who, since the illness of her little brother, had been too much her mother's help and companion to stir often from the house, was invigorated by the fresh air and rapid movement. Choosing the china, though a rather lengthy operation, by no means fatigued her; there were many things in the Palace she wished to look at, and Reuben being also well inclined to prolong his stay, they strolled into various courts, till at last they found themselves gazing at the Mammoth Tree which a few years later the cruel flames destroyed.

Catherine looked at it with a sort of personal regard, for on a former occasion she had roughly sketched the tree, considering it one of those miracles of lovely form which are an undying delight to the eye which recognises their satisfying beauty; and none the less admiringly did she now gaze on the graceful lines she knew so well. Thus was she occupied when startled

by a familiar voice exclaiming with loud and vulgar emphasis, "Come along!"

She instantly perceived the words were not addressed to herself, but they nevertheless caused her to turn round quickly and confront Hannah Burton. It was to her companion, a man, that the woman had spoken, but she recognised Mr. and Mrs. Appersley in a moment, and by instinct, adopting a quieter manner, made a curtsy.

"I hope you are enjoying yourself," said Catherine, who had always a kindly and gracious manner with dependents.

"Yes, thank you, ma'am," said the woman; but she hurried away as if quite unwilling to intrude, or be intruded on.

"That's an ill-looking fellow with Burton," said Reuben, when the pair were out of hearing—"do you not think so?"

"I did not notice him," replied Catherine; "but, Reuben, I noticed something else, which has been to me quite a shock."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Did you see the ear-rings she wore?"

"No, I was looking at the man. But if her ear-rings are smart, I suppose finery is allowable when she is out with her friends?"

"I was not thinking of smartness, but of far different things. The ear-rings Burton is wearing belonged to Phoebe—they were part of her godmother's jewels—I recognised them in a moment."

"Do you think the woman stole them?" cried Reuben.

"No, no, not that; but the fact of her possessing them is a revelation to me," continued Catherine. "Phoebe must have given them to her in requital of some secret service—depend upon it she has been treacherous."

"But are you quite, quite sure?" proceeded Reuben. "It seems to me you had scarcely time to observe what she wore."

"I am quite, quite sure," repeated Catherine; "those ear-rings are too remarkable for me to be mistaken. I have had them in my hand more than once, and I noticed their style and

workmanship, because I admired them so much. I did not, indeed, tell Phoebe how much I liked them, lest I should seem to covet them. I only said they were pretty."

"Are they valuable?" inquired Reuben.

"Much more valuable, I believe," replied Catherine, "than I at first fancied. I have recently noticed some ornaments of a similar kind that Lady Hartington wears, and I know they were given to her by an Indian Prince. Oriental magnates scorn to make mean presents. However, the value of the ear-rings is of no importance, except for showing that they are by no means the sort of present one would make to a servant under ordinary circumstances."

"Well, I don't understand exactly where the line is drawn in the matter of presents," said Reuben; "but no doubt you are right, and taken in connection with the incident of her being up at five o'clock that morning, the case looks rather black against Madam Burton. I wish I had noticed the jewelry myself, but I had only eyes for the man."

"Was he so very ill-looking?" asked Catherine.

"Not hideously ugly, if you mean that," replied her husband. "Some women, perhaps, might think him quite the contrary. It was the gaol-bird look that repelled me."

"Birds of a feather flock together," exclaimed Catherine, with warmth; "and if Burton has really lent herself to Phoebe's deceptions, I think she is wicked enough for anything. And what a hypocrite she must be! One's heart sickens at such a revelation of human nature. Oh! Reuben, let us go home; I cannot feel interested in anything more. Besides, papa and mamma must know, and the whole thing be sifted. I will take upon myself to declare that I have identified the ear-rings."

Reuben drove fleet horses, and he and his wife reached town hours before Burton's "holiday" terminated. There was ample time not only to tell what Catherine had observed, but to discuss the subject in the family circle freely and fully; and the result was a unanimous

opinion that the woman Burton was an arch deceiver, who must be dismissed from the family without delay. Desiring, however, to act justly even to the greatest offender, Hubert Freeth determined to make a straightforward accusation, and put the supposed culprit on her defence. Accordingly, he gave orders that Burton should be sent to the library directly she returned home, as he wished particularly to see her.

It was nearly ten o'clock at night when it was announced to him that Burton had returned, and in a few minutes he and Catherine proceeded to the room indicated. It was desirable there should be a witness at the interview, and besides, it was she who was in one sense the accuser, therefore was it right she should be present.

Tired probably by her day's pleasure, Burton had seated herself while she waited, but she rose as Hubert Freeth entered the room, and revealed the full sweep of her smart dress and holiday attire. As she did so, father and daugh-

ter both observed the absence of earrings, and felt that their removal was itself significant of her guilt. The woman might have wondered a little why she was wanted, but her evil career had hitherto been so smooth, and her late proceedings, as she believed, so carefully veiled, that, if she had any apprehension of "something disagreeable," it was of the vaguest kind. It was true that she had never spoken a dozen words to Mr. Freeth that she remembered, and it was most unusual for him to interfere with female servants; but just now things were at sixes and sevens with the little boy's illness, and perhaps it was only a mere message from one of the ladies. So it was that Hannah Burton argued and satisfied herself, and when she made her curtsy it was with what she intended for a pleasant smile on her face. But she was soon disabused, soon aware that the occasion was grave.

In a few frank words Hubert Freeth stated that, from a discovery he had made, he had reason to believe that Burton had been an ac-

complice in his unhappy daughter's course of deception and clandestine marriage ; and, under these circumstances, he must discharge her instantly from service in his family. As he would not turn a woman out of his house at that hour of the night, she might remain under his roof till the morning, but at the earliest possible hour she must depart.

As Burton began to realise the crisis which had arrived, the "pleasant smile" vanished, and a livid hue spread over her face ; but she was for too practised in deception to be brought to confession while there was a loophole of escape.

"I!—I help Miss Phoebe to elope!" she exclaimed. "Oh! sir, how can you think such a thing of me? It's cruel, that it is; it's taking away a poor servant's character to turn her away at a minute's notice. And I vow and declare——"

"Do not forswear yourself," interrupted Mr. Freeth—"it makes me shudder. If you can prove your innocence I will listen. In the first

place, it is known you were up at five o'clock on the morning my daughter left her home."

"I—I up! Oh! yes, that is Master Gilbert's telling; but he knows I was up getting something for the toothache."

"You told him so, I'm aware. But there are other circumstances, I assure you—principally your possession of the handsome jewelry you were wearing a few hours ago. My daughter must have given it in requital of what the misguided child called service."

"A paltry silver brooch, that she gave me last Christmas, to fasten my shawl," said Burton, with appropriate scorn. "Here it is, if you want it." And, suiting the action to the word, she removed a brooch from her mantle.

"Keep your brooch—I know nothing of it; and keep all your ill-gotten gains, for that matter."

"Oh! sir, what do you mean?" exclaimed the woman, who no doubt was infinitely comforted by Hubert Freeth's last words.

"I mean the pair of earrings you were ob-

served wearing to-day, and which are far too curious for Mrs. Appersley not to have recognised."

"Then it's you, is it?" cried the woman, turning to Catherine as she spoke—"it's you, ma'am, who would rob a poor servant of her character! I wonder you don't say I stole the earrings. What if Miss Phoebe did give them to me?—it was only because she was a kind young lady. And I am sure I thought they were but cheap imitation things, not worth making a fuss about."

"Then why did you remove them from your ears before coming home?" asked Catherine, not resenting Burton's impertinent tone.

"Why—why—because they were heavy, and hurt me. Oh, Mrs. Appersley, I see—it is you that are my enemy; but take care—take care, or you will be sorry for all this!" and as she spoke she glared at Catherine with a look of hate and malice which she never forgot.

"Silence, woman!" exclaimed Mr. Freeth;

now thoroughly roused to anger. "Leave the room, and be ready to leave my house at eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"And my character, sir—my character?" cried Burton, who was now shedding tears of mingled rage and vexation.

"A just character shall be given," returned Mr. Freeth; "a just character, whenever it is demanded; and, meanwhile, if I find I am mistaken in my judgment of you, I will make ample atonement."

"It's cruel and wicked to accuse a poor servant, that it is, when you can't prove anything against her!"

"Papa wishes you to go," interposed Catherine; "did you not hear?"

"Yes, I heard, and I'm going. But you please to say to Mrs Freeth—for she is my mistress, not you—you please to say that I expect the same character as she had with me—a character that'll get me a good situation. It is my right, and I'll have it." And, so saying,

Burton swept out of the room with the air of a much injured woman.

"If I had doubted her guilt before, I should have believed it now. Her whole manner condemns her," exclaimed Hubert Freeth, the moment the door was closed, "and her insolence! Certainly I never felt such hot anger towards a woman in my life before."

"She seemed to threaten me in some sort of way," said Catherine; "I wonder what she meant?"

"My dear, she cannot hurt you. No doubt she is wroth at being found out," continued Hubert Freeth; "and I wish I could have spared you, but I don't quite see how that was possible."

"Certainly, certainly," replied Catherine; "it was only just and right that I should be present, but I wish she were out of the house."

"Well, we need not see her again; your mother can send her the wages due, and I daresay the creature will be glad enough to be off."

"If I believed in the evil eye, I should think that woman had it," observed Catherine.

"What nonsense!" cried her father. And then they rejoined Mrs. Freeth.

CHAPTER XI.

TEDDY.

How changed, dear friend, are thy part and thy child's ;
He bends above *thy* cradle now, or holds
His warning finger out to be thy guide ;
Thou art the nursling now ; he watches thee
Slow learning, one by one, the secret things
Which are to him used sights of every day.

LOWELL.

IT was only justice to the culprit, Hannah Burton, on the part of employers who dismissed her with ignominy, to make assurance doubly sure by a further investigation of many proceedings which preceded Phœbe's flight. The result was a discovery of the part she had played in reference to the box of wearing apparel despatched to the railway-station,

and an entire justification of all their suspicions. In due time an application was made for the lady's-maid's character, and Mrs. Freeth admitted that she could make dresses, and "get up" lace, and dress hair to perfection ; but, when the question of morals came to be discussed, Mrs. Freeth declared her to be unprincipled and untruthful. Of course her services were declined, and the same thing occurring a second time, the Freeths heard no more of Burton for several weeks, and supposed that she had found some way or other of obtaining a situation without referring, in the usual manner, to her last mistress.

It will be remembered that it was Mrs Brindley who, when assisting her friend in the formation of her establishment, had recommended and engaged the lady's-maid. The recollection of this fact, associated with the certainty that it was under Mrs. Brindley's chaperonage that the intimacy between Rawlins and Phoebe had begun, embittered Mrs. Freeth ; and, in her sorrow and anger, she so far forgot her-

self as to allude to the subject again, and this time in really reproachful terms. If Mrs. Freeth was found wanting in

"That repose
Which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere,"

under the present sorrowful circumstances, the fault might have been forgiven, and assuredly would have been pardoned readily by Mrs. Brindley, but for some complicated wheels within wheels which made her seek diligently for any occasion of breaking with the Freeths. Yes, the mother who at one time had thought Lionel an excellent match for her daughter, and had thrown the young people together whenever she had the power of doing so, had now very different views for Aline. A rich middle-aged man, with an indifferent reputation, but "a handle to his name," hopeless of winning the young girl's affections by direct appeals to herself, was wooing her through her mother, and Mrs. Brindley was bending all her energies to promote his views. Accordingly it exactly answered her purpose to greatly resent Mrs.

Freeth's warm-tempered taunt, and make of what had been a little tiff a downright quarrel. And when Lionel, presuming on past intimacy, called with the endeavour to make peace, he was coldly received, and not even allowed to see Aline. He was, however, introduced to an elderly lady visitor, Mrs. Kar, and she heard and remembered the message he left for Aline—a message which was never delivered.

A trouble, however, was now weighing on the Freeths which pressed lighter tribulations almost out of mind. Little Teddy was fading fast away—skilled physicians had declared his days were numbered; and though sea-air, with every prescribed remedy, had been tried, October found the family returned to town, and gathered around the bed of the little sufferer.

Catherine had returned to Five Oaks for a short time, but she was again at Telford House to comfort and assist her mother.

The sick child lies in the best chamber, with all the skilful appliances of science and luxury about him—fine linen and silk hangings, sweet

flowers and luscious fruits, daintiest diet and rarest wine. What a mockery they all seemed when marshalled to oppose the march of the King of Terrors! Yet, after long illness, Death comes as a kind friend, and never is his touch more gentle than when the unopened flower is culled, and a spirit is released from further probation, before the great trials and temptations of life have begun. Yet parents, when they see but a wax-like, inanimate image of their lost darling, take but small comfort from wise saws and common-place condolence. They feel there is some reversal of the natural laws at work; and even when they bow in all meekness to the fiat that has gone forth, they know they have fathomed a depth of sorrow which parents only can know.

Hubert Freeth and his wife had never before lost a child, and the strong man felt the blow very nearly as keenly as did the more fragile woman. He shed tears at the first agonizing moment of realizing his loss; but that phase soon passed. Yet his grief softened his heart

to a degree which astonished himself. Not even to his Bessie would he have owned, as he looked at the dead son, how his heart yearned towards the absent erring daughter. Could he have better borne to see Phoebe thus, as he had declared, than know her the wife of Cuthbert Rawlins?

As for Mrs. Freeth, it is hardly a figure of speech to say that she wept herself blind—the exact truth being that her sight, which had by slow degrees been failing, became much further and permanently weakened by the mental strain of her sorrow and excessive weeping. In all the sorrow, Catherine was the great stay and comfort. And after a little while a great wave of comfort seemed to pass over poor Mrs. Freeth. She became conscious that a change had taken place in her husband—a change which drew them softly, but surely, nearer together. It was as if the recent affliction had thawed the icy crust of worldliness from about his heart, revealing beneath the deep well of the olden love.

It has been said, and very truly, that the test of a man's regard for a woman is his willingness to give her his time—his society. Money he may bestow from lavishness, or a sense of duty; seemly attentions he may bestow from courtly habits of attention; but when a man deliberately cultivates his wife's society, then all is right between them. It may be that there is much nonsense talked about women being educated to be the companions of their husbands. Men do not want argument and clever discussion in their home-lives. Their combativeness is sufficiently exercised in the world's more public arena. What they do want is goodness to which they can look up; sufficient culture to make the eye bright and thought swift; a "mother wit," that is sometimes crushed and withered by over-much book learning, but which, allowed fair play, often develops in mature years to true wisdom; and warm affections, that, out of their great storehouse, can generally furnish excuses for man's petulance and caprice—affections which show the beauty of constancy

by bright example, and lead women to yield without murmuring, on the frequent occasions when one or the other must bend.

In his sadness Hubert Freeth was comforted merely by the presence of his wife, and both felt that their trouble was one with which a "stranger intermeddleth not." And so it came to pass that they were more together, more all in all to each other, than they had been since the days of narrow means and anxious cares.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SNAKE BITES.

From his eyes it seemed to reek,
In his lips it curl'd in pain ;
In each feature of his face,
Swell'd in anger and disdain,

CHARLES MACKAY.

IT was about a fortnight after little Teddy's short life had closed ; and though Reuben Appersley had come up to London expressly to take his wife home, she still lingered, well aware of the solace her mere presence was to her bereaved mother. However, the day for her return to Five Oaks was now definitely fixed, and meanwhile there were some hitherto neglected commissions from the elder Mrs. Ap-

persley to execute, and various personal arrangements to make, which rendered both Catherine and Reuben decidedly busy. This constant occupation was good for Catherine; for the death of her little brother was the first occasion on which that which is the most awful thing on earth had come close to her heart, laying a cold hand there, as it plucked away a beloved object, and everything which distracted her mind was in one sense beneficial.

Reuben understood, by a sort of common sense, how desirable it was that she should be fully employed, for though it could not be expected that he, personally, should feel the child's death very much, he was not insensible to the mournful influences around him. It is when the shutters are again folded back, and the daylight streams in on the black garments, and the old routine of the family is again established, "with a difference," that the absent link is often more keenly felt than at the first moment of bereavement. It was so in the Freeth family on the present occasion, while even the poor child's

toys were indeed "turned to relics," and "gazed at through tears."

Somehow the little ship had the disagreeable association of Burton about it, especially to Gilbert's mind; and within these few days the woman had been to the house and made a vain attempt to extort money. Catherine had seen her, had spoken to her even with some commiseration, had promised to find her needlework to do, if she chose to undertake it, but still had resolutely refused to give her money, or to take any part in recommending her as a servant. Towards the close of the interview the woman grew insolent, declined the needlework, declaring she "had not come to that yet," and finally endeavoured to intimidate Catherine by threats—similar in character to those she had uttered on a former occasion, but a trifle more violent and explicit. Literally, she had to be turned out of the house, the butler taking her by the shoulders, and leading her away. It was at this juncture that she clenched her hand at Catherine, and exclaimed, "I'll bring you to the

ground!" Probably, had any one of the gentlemen of the family been at home, there would have been a scene that might have led to consequences at a Police Court.

It was only a few days after this occurrence, and Catherine had just come in from shopping. She found two or three letters addressed to herself on the hall table, and one to Reuben, and she gathered them all together as she passed on to the inner drawing-room, which was her usual resort. It had been the pleasant habit of their married life to open each other's letters whenever they felt so inclined; and no doubt Catherine would have opened this one to her husband had it been unaccompanied by others. But her own letters absorbed her attention; and as the one in question was directed in a bad handwriting, which she did not recognise, it was without interest to her; she thought it a bill or a circular, and put it on the mantelpiece, in readiness for him, leaning it against the glass, that it might not escape his eye. Yet, after she had seated herself, she more than once look-

ed at the letter with a sort of idle wonder who it could be that wrote so vile a hand. But Catherine was rather tired, and it was really too much trouble to rise and ascertain the writer.

Presently Reuben, who also had been out, entered the room, and spoke cheerfully on two or three subjects, before Catherine drew his attention to the letter on the mantelpiece. Even then he went on with his discourse, though opening the envelope as he did so; and when the enclosure was released, he sat down at the table to peruse it, just opposite to his wife.

Catherine looked at him as he read, and saw such lines of wrath and horror come into his face, that she herself was dismayed, and could not help exclaiming,

“What is it? What is it? Oh, tell me!”

At her words he looked up, and doubtless saw her anxiety reflected on her expressive countenance. As he did so, his own face acquired a sternness such as she had never seen before. All softness had gone from his eyes as they met her own, with a hard, stony stare.

"Oh, Reuben!" she cried, now in real terror, "what is it?—what has happened?"

And he answered, in a voice like the voice of a stranger, so husky and coarse was it from suppressed emotion,

"What's all this about Raybrooke?"

"About Raybrooke!" exclaimed Catherine. "What is it you mean?"

"Answer me the truth——"

"I never did other in my life," interrupted Catherine, now rising and speaking with dignity. "Oh, Reuben, what can make you speak in this manner to me?"

"Answer me the truth—did you ever faint away in that man's arms?"

"I fainted away when I had returned from the Drawing-room, and I believe Sir Algernon Raybrooke caught me—did you never know that little episode?"

"Know it!—you never told me. Oh, God, it is all true!" and dropping the letter from his grasp as he spoke, Reuben Appersley leaned his elbows on the table, and buried his face in his hands.

"All true ! Reuben, Reuben, what is it you mean ?"

And as she uttered the words, she laid her hand on her husband's shoulder. With a slight shudder he seemed to repel her touch, but he suffered her to take up the letter, and raising his face, looked at her fixedly as she, sinking into a chair, read the following lines :

"HONOURED SIR,

"You may think it is revenge for the cruel treatment I have received which makes me tell, but, for all that, it is the truth, and I think it right you should know about the love-making of your wife and Sir Algernon Raybrooke, both afore she was married and since. If you doubt my words, you ask Mrs. Gillespie, for she's thick in it. Ask her about the waltzing with him, not three days before she was married to you ; ask her about the nosegay of flowers as was sent the morning of the wedding. I've got them flowers still, dried up as they are to sticks. And as for the kissing and

fainting away when she was in her grand Court dress, that I saw with my own eyes, and would swear to any day. And so I am, honoured sir,

“Yours truly,

“HANNAH BURTON.

“P.S.—I might have written you a nonimus letter, but I am willing to stick to what I say. I am not so low yet as to take in needlework. I've got a good place at last, and if it's not quite the sort I wished, it's the fault of them as refused me a character. But my new mistress is as good as Mrs. Reuben Appersley any day, and not such a hypocrite.”

There is a condition of agonised excitement in which there seems no alternative between instant death or madness, and the maintenance of absolute calmness; and as Catherine read this letter, she felt herself crushed down to a far deeper depth of anguish than that which finds relief in tears and outcries. She was conscious of her husband's unflinching gaze, conscious too

that this to him also was a moment of supreme suffering ; but there was not a flash of hesitation in her mind, not an instant of unworthy cowardice to whisper prevarication. She had become deadly pale, but she looked up and met Reuben's gaze with tearless eyes as she said, in a clear low tone,

"Yes ; I waltzed for about a minute with Algernon Raybrooke the night of the children's party ; I believe that he was the unknown friend who sent me the bouquet, but I do not know it. Yet admitting all this, I have to add that he never spoke a word of love to me in his life."

"Ah ! but you feel that he loves you ?" exclaimed Reuben, with something more like a groan than a sigh ; "you are woman enough to be aware of it. Answer me—I will have an answer—you know that he loves you ?"

"I have no right to say so," murmured Catherine ; and she added, "Oh ! Reuben, Reuben, now you are becoming cruel."

"Cruel ! I cruel ! that is a good joke," exclaim-

ed Reuben ; and he continued, "Now tell me about the fainting and kissing."

"If Sir Algernon Raybrooke took an unworthy advantage of my insensibility, I never knew it ; but I will not believe the accusation of such a woman as Burton ; nothing would make me believe it, short of his own confession."

"But why was I never told of the fainting fit?" again urged Reuben, in the same hard, un-pitying tone.

"From inadvertence in the first instance," replied Catherine ; "it had happened hours before you returned home, and if you recollect the evening at all, you will remember how many subjects there were to discuss—the children's illness, and the discovery of Phœbe's deception, seemed to drive smaller affairs out of my mind ; why, I doubt if my mother has ever heard of the occurrence to this day. I know I begged Hester not to add to her distress by telling her of it."

"You seem to think fainting to the point of insensibility a small affair," returned Reuben.

"I cannot say I should have considered it so. I wonder what other events have been kept from me—inadvertently, of course," he added with bitter irony; and then, as if his wrath had gained fresh fuel, he exclaimed, "What does the woman mean by Mrs. Gillespie being in the thick of it?"

"You had better ask her," retorted Catherine, whose anguish now seemed merged in indignation; the indignation in its turn being mastered by a sense of helpless suffering—all the wretched tangle of her lot passing in rapid review through her mind, intensified by the cruel thought that Janet, whom she so loved, Janet, who alone had suspected the sharpest pain of her life, must have betrayed it. For she knew nothing of the listening at the warped door. The conflict of emotions was too fierce for outward calm to be any longer maintained. Catherine burst into a passion of weeping, and buried her face in her handkerchief.

"My belief is that you loved that man!" cried

Reuben; "answer me, and don't store up a lie for the Day of Judgment."

"Oh! Reuben, Reuben, you are killing me!" moaned Catherine, and without uncovering her face. "On my soul I have been to you a true and loving wife, in word and deed."

"And thought?"

"I have fought such a fight with thoughts, that, but for that letter, I must have conquered. Oh, Reuben, why would you marry me? I never wronged you but in suffering myself to be persuaded to keep my engagement."

"Ah! I remember," and he sighed deeply as if a new fountain of sorrow were unsealed, which, though it served to melt his wrath, intensified his grief and regret. Calm looks and cold letters; the lengthened engagement and Catherine's desire to cancel it; her profession of cousinly regard, and the vague dissatisfaction of his married life—all fell into place like so many links of a chain, or the pieces of a child's puzzle; while the voluntary exile of Algernon Raybrooke seemed to ratify the truth of every-

thing Catherine had said, and break up the blackest clouds with which his mental atmosphere was charged.

In this terrible crisis Catherine's thoughts swept back over all the period of her engaged and married life, from the day when "Cousin Reuben" won a half-reluctant "Yes" to his pleadings; and, notably, she remembered the day when he had owned to the demon of jealousy that slumbered in his heart. Ah! now she had seen the hideous monster roused and felt its fury! And yet, though remembering so much, the dreadful present seemed all in all—her future, her earthly future was obscured, as if the mist of tears and the darkness of heart-anguish hid all things to come.

Suddenly she rose to leave the room, and was obliged to pass close to her husband. As she did so, Reuben caught the hand which hung by her side, and grasped it, but without speaking. Her right hand held her handkerchief pressed tightly to her mouth. She was touched by his action, and her tears flowed more freely

than ever, but she wrote only a few words and
they came with indifference—

"Dear Benben—no—I must go."

Benben looked up: Catherine's handwriting
was unusual. She had broken a blood-
vessel!

CHAPTER XIII.

JANET AND HER BEST BELOVED.

She is fast changing. Day by day
The bloom of her beauty is swept away,
The light has died out of those eyes of blue,
Her hand is so thin the sun shines through.

WILLIAM SAWYER.

WE may depend upon it, there is always some element of truth in time-honoured phrases, and it may be that a "broken heart" is not quite the myth some people suppose it. Yet how few there are who can sincerely sympathise with any distress that does not take a palpable shape!—unless, indeed, it be very similar to some sorrow from which they them-

selves are suffering at the moment! "They are the silent griefs which cut the heart-strings," and no doubt the life-disappointment with which Catherine had wrestled had undermined her health, or her physical frame would have held out a little longer—would have borne another screw or two of the mental rack on which she was being tortured. But when Reuben Appersley recognised what had happened, and witnessed a sharp and dangerous physical suffering, a revulsion came over him; he was pitiful in an instant, and supported Catherine in his strong arms to her chamber.

In this first moment of painful excitement the dreadful letter from Burton was left for, perhaps, ten minutes on the drawing-room table; but when Reuben had given his wife into Janet's charge and sent off for medical advice, he remembered the letter and hastened to recover it. There was no appearance of anyone having entered the room during his absence, so that, when he crushed the horrid slander into his pocket, he had no fear that it had been seen.

And now there was another great grief for the Freeths—another dear child was stricken by alarming illness. Again physicians' carriages were at the door; again the family stepped lightly, and spoke softly, and again one chamber in the house became a sacred spot, to which all thoughts were turned.

Happily, the faculty dissipated ideas of immediate danger, but they spoke with a certain gravity of the necessity of future care, and the inevitable tediousness of the patient's recovery. One of the first and most peremptory commands was that she should not attempt to speak for many days, perhaps weeks, to come; and even the exertion of using a slate, with which at present she was provided, was considered so great that she was advised to abstain from using it as much as possible.

Reuben Appersley had plenty of determination when once he had made up his mind what to do; but he was not sure that the present trouble was one he could best steer through without any sort of help or advice. And yet

there was obviously but one person in the world to whom he could bare his sorrow, and that was his wife's father, Hubert Freeth. The more he thought on the subject, the more persuaded he became that, for Catherine's sake not less than his own, it was right that he should be apprised of what had happened; but still it seemed a terrible thing to lay that letter before him. Reuben, however, was relieved from any indecision in a very unexpected manner.

When Hubert Freeth came home from his office that mournful day, at a somewhat earlier hour than usual, he sorrowed at the news of Catherine's illness, but scarcely seemed surprised; and hardly had he and Reuben met, before it became apparent that there was very little to communicate either on one side or the other. The fact was, the cruel slanderer had written a letter to Mr. Freeth, directing it to his office, almost identical in its contents with that which Reuben had received. Perhaps she had doubted whether the latter would be allowed to reach Reuben's hands, and had

adopted a second means of satisfying her malignity.

No doubt Hannah Burton, judging of human nature by the lurid light of her own "hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness," thought that the father and husband would believe her vile accusation—at least, to the extent of causing a great estrangement of Catherine from her family, with censure and disgrace. Also it may be surmised that the slanderer expected some overtures would be made to bribe her to silence. But in her evil anticipations she had in one sense vastly overrated her own powers of mischief. Hotly indignant as Hubert Freeth felt in reading this vile letter, he saw at a glance that it was the effusion of malice, and did not believe that it contained even those little grains of truth which Reuben had discovered. He would have liked to punish the writer as he well knew the law might have punished her; but, alas! the delicate bloom of a woman's reputation ever suffers by the handling that is necessary for its vindication. After an hour's

distressing and indignant discussion, father and husband both agreed that the most dignified course was to take no sort of notice of the letters. In his great wrath, Reuben was not quite easily persuaded to silence; but after a time he felt the force of Hubert Freeth's arguments, and even admitted that the finding herself entirely ignored might really be the severest punishment to the woman.

If she had any emissaries, as it was very likely she had, who brought her news of what was going on at Telford House, she must have experienced a blank disappointment, unless, indeed, she was able to associate Catherine's illness with her own dark work. Out of pity and tenderness to Mrs. Freeth, already bowed down by sorrow, she was not apprised of the letters; and all that a looker-on could have reported was the absolute devotion of an entire household to a beloved and stricken sufferer.

Nevertheless, one person had been enlightened. Janet Gillespie's name had been connected with the slander, and Hubert Freeth, well knowing

the rectitude and fidelity of the old nurse, believed it would be a relief to Reuben's mind to hear any explanation she might have to give. What had she to tell? Nothing but what had been open to every observer,—that Catherine had danced with Algernon Raybrooke the night of the children's party, and had received on her wedding morning a magnificent *bouquet* from an anonymous donor. Positively Burton could only have surmised whence it came, since no one knew. As for the fainting-fit Janet had not heard of it till days afterwards, she having been engaged with the sick children at the time. But she spoke so warmly, and with such intimate knowledge of the beloved Catherine, that she elicited pity for herself as being the secondary object of Burton's accusation; and she surely had no right to betray her own guesses and conjectures as to Catherine's mental struggles! Yet the time came—not just yet—when she was charged to tell Reuben any truth which might loosen Catherine's hold upon his heart.

But this revelation made to Janet, the second

day of Catherine's illness, explained not only the seizure, but the mental suffering which the faithful woman had detected during the long night-watch she had kept. It was well they had confided in her. Though Catherine might not speak she could listen, and Janet, by a few words of explanation, cleared herself completely; and having the quiet wisdom of a Christian woman, and Catherine being her best beloved on earth, the wakeful hours of many a future night were periods of soul-nurture to the sufferer, that brought peace and resignation, which were never more to depart from her mind.

It was late in the Autumn before Catherine was in a condition to be removed to her own home at Five Oaks. Even then she was so decidedly an invalid that Janet Gillespie accompanied her as nurse.

CHAPTER XIV.

CATHERINE AT FIVE OAKS.

Slowly lost,
Nor greatly cared to lose her hold on life.

TENNYSON.

MRS. APPERSLEY, senior, was expecting Catherine's return home with some anxiety. Not that she allowed herself to think very seriously of the illness, the particulars of which had been duly communicated to her; and be it remarked that Reuben's mother had a surprising power of "not allowing herself" to think thoughts which her strong will made her desirous to ignore. Nevertheless she understood that it was as a decided invalid the true mistress of the house must be received, and so in making her

preparations the wide old-fashioned sofa which usually remained at the end of the room, as if nailed to the wall, was drawn to one side of the fire-place, and a large folding screen, long disused, was brought from an upstairs lumber-closet, in readiness to ward off draughts; and old Mrs. Appersley sincerely hoped that Catherine would not "give way" to keeping her room, but would endeavour to take her place in the little circle, as of old.

Certainly these little alterations in the arrangements of the "Salle of the Gold Cup and Battling Deer" were improvements, making the comfortable room still more cosy; and Mrs. Appersley, running over in her mind the various delicacies with which she had stocked the larder, felt thorough satisfaction at her own forethought.

It was in this frame of mind that she listened for wheels in the avenue, and saw the carriage which had been sent to the railway station draw up. First Reuben dismounted, next Janet Gillespie, and then both assisted Catherine, and

supported her one on each side. Mrs. Appersley had come into the hall to receive them, and seeing the pale attenuated woman who advanced slowly to meet her, she gave a little cry of surprise.

Catherine smiled. She fully understood that her appearance had shocked her mother-in-law, but she herself was thoroughly aware of the great change that had come over her; and she knew how much more apparent it must be to one who had not seen her since before her illness than to those who had watched her for the last few weeks.

"Do not be anxious about me," she said, when she had received Mrs. Appersley's kiss. "I know I look ill, but you see I am come home for your kind nursing."

"The very best thing you could do," exclaimed Mrs. Appersley, with more tenderness than she often evinced. "Though you were not born in Meadshire, I consider it a sort of native air to you. Janet can tell you how it brought you from death's door when you were a baby, and

we'll see, my dear, what we can do for you now."

"Dear aunt, I am glad to be at home again, I assure you," replied Catherine, who by this time had reached the sofa.

"It is that horrid London that has knocked you up," exclaimed Mrs. Appersley, warming herself to something very like anger as she spoke. "How people can live in its noise and smoke and dirt I cannot imagine."

"Oh, the quiet and freshness here are delightful," said Catherine.

"Mother, it is sorrow and excitement that have done the mischief," observed Reuben. "You forget what a year of trouble it has been."

"No, I don't," she replied. "And who knows, if they had sent poor little Teddy to me, new milk and the breath of the cows might have cured him."

"I hardly think it," cried Reuben. "Believe me, every human means was adopted to promote his recovery; it is the consciousness of this which reconciles us all more than anything else.

But there were other troubles besides poor little Edward's death."

"You mean Phoebe," exclaimed Mrs. Appersley; "but, in my opinion, a girl who could act as she has done is not worth thinking about. I hope Catherine has not been so weak as to fret about her."

"It is not quite easy to throw off a sister," said Catherine, a little conscious that she was concealing the great personal trouble of her life, but very grateful to Reuben for his helpful tact in assisting her to do so.

At this moment there was a diversion which turned the conversation. Floss was heard scratching at the door, as with a sharp bark she entreated to be let in. Floss was growing old now, and no longer bounded with agility, but she trotted to Catherine's side, and evinced her delight in all orthodox dog-fashion. After one or two ineffectual attempts, she even accomplished a leap on to the sofa, and nestled at Catherine's feet, just within reach of her hand.

"Down, down, bad dog!" exclaimed Mrs. Appersley, senior.

"Oh, let her stay," pleaded the invalid, whose thin fingers were now half hidden by one of the dog's drooping ears; "pray let her stay; she is so faithful, and I love her so much."

"Oh, of course if you wish it. But I like dogs in their places, not upon sofa cushions," returned the elder lady.

"Floss will be quite a companion to me," continued Catherine. "I can see that she has grown staid since last year, and will be able to share my quiet life."

"You always were ridiculous about that dog," observed Mrs. Appersley, "but I am sure, my dear, I am glad of anything that pleases you."

Be it remarked that this was a very affectionate little speech, considering who was the speaker; and Catherine felt it as such, making many grateful resolutions on the strength of it. For there is a condition of bodily weakness in which the poor human nature craves so ardently for kindly help and gentle forbearance and

loving sympathy, that it is grateful for mere shreds and patches of consideration ; and Catherine was now infinitely touched by yielding softness from one accustomed to rule. In future she would consider her words more than ever, so as if possible never to thwart her husband's mother.

"Floss shall have a shawl of her own to lie on," said Catherine, "then it will be all right. It is quite true that down pillows were not intended for dogs."

And now there began for Catherine a life of quiet routine, in which one day was exceedingly like another. Winter was approaching, yet on exceptionally mild days she was drawn for a little while in a garden-chair along the sunny paths. Otherwise she reclined chiefly on the old sofa, with books and work within reach. Often, especially when Mrs. Appersley was occupied elsewhere, Janet sat with her ; but there were many hours when, too listless to read or work, she gazed out at the landscape with a sort of pity for the leafless trees, and the load

of wintry ills they seemed to bear. Perhaps oftener still her eyes made a "tour" of the room, associated as it was with memorable events of her life. The childish days when, as a little visitor, much petted and caressed, she played with her doll, came back to her vividly, and the girlish time when "Cousin Reuben" first played the ardent lover. Then mentally was reacted all the period of her short married life—the honeymoon days, the election time with all its episodes, and the ordinary country life which she had thought commonplace and dull, but which, with its out-of-door enjoyments, seemed now in its retrospect brightly pleasant and exhilarating.

But all these memories were like the pages of a sealed-up book, and "never again" seemed written everywhere. As Catherine, reclining on her sofa, gazed straight forward, her eyes always rested on an old-fashioned mirror, which reflected the battling antlers above the chimney-piece, but, diminished and made grotesque by the distorting glass, the bony branches seemed

to have lost their significance. They no longer hurt her eye as the type of hopeless struggle and wretched entanglement; or was it that Catherine had passed to a higher form in the school of life, and that earthly hopes and struggles to fulfil them had ceased to be among her lessons?

Sometimes Reuben read to her; he seemed to like that occupation better than talking to her, though he always brought her scraps of interesting news, and often dwelt on the inquiries he was still prosecuting with regard to George Otway. In many thoughtful ways he made it a point of duty and kindness not to neglect her. Keenly well Catherine knew that, though he was no longer the lover-husband, he was still the true and tender friend, and both perhaps believed that no looker-on could discover that a gulf had opened between them; a gulf it might be soft with moss, but still a chasm that would never close.

But Reuben's mother was too shrewd and observant to be entirely deceived; yet, like

most suspicious persons, she jumped at wrong conclusions. She thought Catherine's sad state of health had in some measure alienated her husband, and, though she was herself bitterly vexed and disappointed by it, she was far too "proper" a person to excuse even her own son, should he cool in his lawful allegiance.

"Reuben," she exclaimed one morning after their breakfast—a *tête-à-tête* meal, for Catherine never came down till nearly noon—"should we not have further advice for Catherine? Her recovery seems very slow."

"I do not think she would like a strange doctor," replied Reuben. "Mr. Goodfield watches the case, and calls nearly every day; and he is in communication with the London physicians. What more can we do?"

"But she doesn't seem to mend. And your wife, your dear wife, is too important a person to be trifled with."

"Mother, do not talk of trifling. She has had, and shall have, every earthly alleviation of her sufferings."

"Of course, of course." And then, somewhat hurt by her son's manner, she passed into a little wail of regret. "Ah! who could have thought that such a trouble as this would come into your married life?"

"Ah! who indeed!" sighed Reuben.

"I know it is a great trial," said Mrs. Appersley; "but I hope we shall both be able to love her just as much as if she were well and strong."

"Mother, what are you driving at?" exclaimed Reuben, starting up, and speaking in hot anger. "What is it you mean?"

"Mean! Exactly what I say. I wonder, Reuben, you dare speak to your mother in such a manner."

"There are some things a man will not bear even from his mother," cried Reuben. "And if you are any way disappointed in my married life, be pleased to remember you were the match-maker."

"Oh!—oh!"

"Listen, if you please. Whatever my faults

may have been, want of love and devotion to my wife has not been one of them. She knows that as well as you ought to do. Poor girl!—poor girl!”

“Then what is it?” cried Mrs. Appersley.

“*It—it*—what phantom are you talking about?”

And cowed and mystified more than she had ever been in her life, Mrs. Appersley had no rejoinder ready.

“Forgive me, mother,” said the son, after a little pause—“forgive me if I have used strong language. I did not mean to be undutiful; but you do not know how sharply your words stung me.”

CHAPTER XV.

GEORGE OTWAY AT LAST.

To have my aim, and yet to be
Farther from it than when I bent my bow.

To make my hopes my torture and the fee
Of all my woes another woe.

HERBERT.

WINTER had set in with sudden sharpness. For twenty hours snow had fallen with scarcely a minute's intermission. At first in the great feather flakes which quickly whitened the ground, and then in the finer, more dust-like crystals which filled up every crevice, and made the earth's winding-sheet complete. Afterwards came a hard frost, which crisped the surface

with its fine glaze, and stopped the water-mills and bid the little streams to tarry.

Of course it was weather that made such an invalid as Catherine had now become, more a recluse than ever; but she was so carefully shielded from its inclemency that it cannot be said she suffered from it. Only the in-door life was now absolute, and its monotony but little varied. Not that she wearied or sighed for more excitement—she was quite conscious that her fragile frame was unequal to exertion, and rejoiced at every simple gratification that was within her reach. It is a truth little, I think, dwelt upon, but a truth, nevertheless, that in certain stages of illness, of great physical debility unaccompanied by acute pain, the mind seems preternaturally clear and active. Perhaps not usefully so to the world at large, because the mind's servant is inefficient, but with a power of self-enrichment beyond computing. It was so in Catherine's case. All that in her short life she had seen, and heard, and read, and thought which was best worthy of remembrance,

seemed in its quintessence to be ready at her call. Thought interweaved with thought, producing unexpected combinations, but always of a sort that made order out of chaos, and threw light on dark places. She was learning those best lessons which fifty years of great earthly happiness might have failed to teach her.

It was one Saturday evening ; the little group, consisting of Reuben Appersley and his wife and mother, had just finished tea, and the table had been cleared. Curtains were drawn, and the lamps lighted, and the fire had lately been replenished by a great log, which threw a white and flickering light about the room we know so well. It seemed to make the quaint figures on the screen quainter, and Floss's glossy coat, as she lay on the hearthrug, more glossy. It flickered on the mirror till the antlers depicted therein seemed to quiver and unlock, and it burnished the gold race-cup, and made the portrait above it look like life.

The firelight brightened even the living forms, each one of which had something of the pictur-

esque in its appearance—Reuben, in the prime of his manhood, touched with care which had deepened the lines of thought, and so added a touch of dignity to his comeliness; his mother, tall and thin, seated erect on a somewhat stiff-backed chair, with grey hair neatly braided beneath a coif suitable to her age; her dress black silk, accidentally relieved by a mass of scarlet wool she was occupied in knitting for a hood. Her bony hands were full of character, as, adorned only by her wedding-ring, and a massive mourning-ring, they moved the knitting-pins with easy activity.

Catherine was a little better than usual, had left her sofa, and was sitting near the table; her fingers were also busy, but on some delicate white embroidery. Her black dress was made warm with much swansdown, which scarcely looked whiter than herself. She was hoping Mrs. Appersley would not notice her work, or make inquiries about it, for the embroidery was intended as a *souvenir* for Hester Otway, who had been full of kindness during Catherine's

illness in London. One other touch may make the picture of the invalid more vivid. Catherine's rich dark hair was simply plaited and twisted, but, young as she was, she wore some white lace on her head. She had excellent taste, and felt the æsthetics of dress without reasoning about them. Why is it—can any one tell?—that an invalid woman of any age looks haggard, weird, “uncanny,” without something that, at the least, typifies and suggests the “cap?” Is it that there is a bold assumption indicated by the bare head in woman just opposite to the expression of the bare head of man, and which finds warrant in St. Paul's direction to the sex? At any rate the most artistic nations have adopted the veil or the mantilla, the coif, the turban, the hood, or the *pezzotto*, to be worn quite early in life.

Reuben was turning over a newspaper rather listlessly, sometimes reading a little paragraph aloud, or chatting about some local affair. To a looker on the scene was calm and peaceful,

without the slightest sign of any approaching storm. Suddenly wheels were heard in the swept avenue, and at the same moment Floss roused herself and started up, with ears raised to listen. Then a lusty pull at the bell awakened its deepest note, as, in the frosty air, every sound had a little touch of shrillness that seemed to invite the echoes.

"Visitors at this time!" cried Mrs. Appersley. "I wonder who it can be? Saturday evening, too, when there is no drawing-room fire."

"Never mind, mother, about the drawing-room," said Reuben, so little stirred that he was still holding the newspaper when a servant entered the room, and delivered what appeared a letter, saying,

"The gentleman, sir, is waiting."

But the missive was no letter—only a sealed envelope enclosing a card, on which was written, "George Otway."

Reuben started to his feet with a strong exclamation, not usual with him, and which need not be repeated. Then, remembering the pres-

ence of the servant, he controlled himself, saying to the man,

"Tell the gentleman I will be with him directly. And see to his trap, whatever it is," he added, "and have it put up."

"Will you see him," inquired Reuben, turning to his mother, who had possessed herself of the card, and whose face seemed kindling with exultation. Flushed cheeks, flashing eyes, dilated nostrils, transfigured the faded and usually rigid countenance, reminding one of alabaster lighted from within.

"See him!" exclaimed Mrs. Appersley, "of course I will. Bring him in here at once; let me hear every word he has to say."

"And you, Catherine? Are you equal to the excitement of such an interview," asked her husband.

"Perhaps not. Perhaps it would be better I should go to my room," exclaimed Catherine, drawing a shawl around her; "if I ring, Janet will come to me."

Reuben helped to adjust her shawl, and open-

ed the door, which was just at the foot of the old oak staircase. Then he passed across the wide hall, where a good fire was blazing, before which stood a stranger stretching out his hands to warm them. At the sound of footsteps the visitor turned, and thus it was that Reuben Appersley confronted his father's dearest friend, George Otway. By an instinct of hospitable greeting, Reuben held out his hand, but the other did not take it.

"Wait," he exclaimed, "not yet."

"As you please. I am sorry if you feel enmity. But be good enough to follow me. My mother wishes to see you," said Reuben.

"Does she really? In the old days there was not much love between us," cried Otway, in a tone that would have been very bitter but for a sigh which was audible; and as he spoke he moved across the hall, as one who knew well the ways of the house.

The visitor's thick overcoat was visibly touched by the frost, and as, hat in hand, he made a formal bow to Mrs. Appersley as he was

ushered into her presence, he seemed to bring with him some of the inclemency of the night. Advancing towards the table at which Mrs. Appersley had been seated, he leaned one hand upon it, but declined the chair Reuben placed for him.

A stalwart man was George Otway, though now between fifty and sixty years of age. Broad chested and strong limbed, he was the very type of a man capable of "roughing it" through life; and assuredly he looked as if he had known hardships and trials. His bronzed and weather-beaten face appeared the darker from its contrast with a thick white beard; while a pair of hazel eyes, still bright and clear-seeing, gave animation to the countenance.

Though the visitor remained standing, Mrs. Appersley had resumed her chair, her words of greeting having been,

"I should have known you anywhere."

"And I, madam, may return the compliment," cried Otway, "if compliment it be. But, good heavens!" he continued, speaking with increasing

excitement, "nothing here seems changed—if only I could fancy that the son was the father—the son who no doubt fancies he has brought me to bay."

"I have no wish to use such a term," said Reuben, a little bewildered by George Otway's manner.

"Very possibly," replied the visitor, "for people never like ugly names to be given to their deeds. But I wish you to know that I am by no means at bay; I came here of my own free will, though to say a few words which would never have been spoken if you had not set men-hunters on my track. I came to England about my own affairs—to pay my debts—and provide for my daughter, and I should have returned to Australia without making any further sign, if I had remained unsuspected and unmolested."

"Was it not natural that I should seek out the only person who could once for all thoroughly clear and vindicate my father's memory?" said Reuben with gentleness.

"And did it never occur to you," cried Ot-

way, now sinking into a chair, "that the friend who was to your father as a brother, might have his own way of shielding that father's memory."

"I said vindicate, not shield," replied Reuben.

"I am aware you did. Oh! what folly there is in the world! I wish, young man, you did not look so like your father—I wish that picture was not staring me in the face—and oh! I wish now that I had contented myself with baffling all your clues, as, mark me, I have done, for your people have never quite found me."

"Mr. Otway," said Reuben, "if my inquiries have given you pain, I am sorry for it, and I beg pardon of my father's old friend. I never meant to injure you. You talk now as if you were in easy circumstances; we did not know this. Forgive my frankness. In seeking you I meant to compensate you fully for any inconvenience I might occasion."

"From my heart I wish you had left me alone. Now say exactly what it is you want."

"What you only can do," returned Reuben. "Of late years the old slander has been revived, and I want you to make a deposition, and sign and print it, renewing and amplifying the evidence you gave on the inquest after my father's death, and thus give me the power of punishing falsehood and silencing calumny."

"What if I refuse to do this?" said Otway.

"But surely," cried Reuben—"surely you will not refuse to perform such a simple act of kindness?"

"Say justice," interposed his mother, with some asperity.

"Justice! Is it really justice, madam, that you are seeking?" asked Otway.

"Do not let us bandy words," cried Reuben. "Now that you have returned to England, under happier circumstances than you left it, why should you object to the performance of a good deed, in memory of an old friend?"

"Ask me not for reasons, and betray me not in any way. Let me be to you, as to everyone else, George Oldham, the Australian

adventurer. I cannot do what you desire."

"And you will not even write down the facts that you know?" said Mrs. Appersley.

"I will not," replied Otway.

"Then, if there is law in England, you shall be made to comply!" exclaimed Mrs. Appersley.

"Hush, mother!" cried Reuben, deeply moved.

"I will not hush!" cried his mother, her hot temper gaining the mastery. "I always knew Mr. Otway was your father's worst enemy, and he is proving himself so to the last."

"Beware!" exclaimed Otway, and in the word there was a concentration of threats.

"Beware of what?" cried Mrs. Appersley. "You are not now among savages, but in a civilized country, where people can be made to do what is right. All the world shall know you are in England, and you shall be appealed to by some one who can make you speak out."

It will be perceived that Mrs. Appersley had rather hazy notions about the law and her own power of enforcing it; but Reuben was too in-

tent on calming her wrath to argue with her, and their visitor looked at her scornfully and angrily for a few moments before his pent-up feelings had vent.

"And so I am to be cursed as your husband's worst enemy!" he exclaimed. "Well, in requital, you shall know the truth—the whole, unvarnished truth. Curses I may deserve, but not from you. Why, it was because I knew myself as great a perjurer as ever escaped the felon's dock, and because I dreaded being placed there, that I fled my country. Madam, your husband *was* concerned in poisoning the Favourite that time you know of, and, maddened by losses, and dreading exposure, he committed suicide, if ever a man did."

"I don't believe it!" shrieked Mrs. Appersley, who, in her horror at Otway's words, had thrust back her grey hair till combs were loosened, and it fell in disorder about her ears.

"Ah! but you shall and must believe it!" continued Otway. "Now keep quiet and listen. As for you," he added, turning to Reuben,

who had only groaned, "I am sorry for you, from the bottom of my heart. But I came here armed with proofs, if I should be driven to use them."

So saying, he took a handful of papers from his breast-pocket, and in doing so accidentally—or of intent—revealed that he carried a revolver.

"The habit of the Bush," he observed. "I never travel without a weapon."

"Now this is the death-bed confession of the groom who was the accomplice, and which I have only obtained within the last fortnight," continued Otway. "I wanted it to clear myself from any possible accusation, if that story should ever be raked up; and you have only to watch the circumstantial evidence to see how it all fits in. I was bad enough, Heaven knows, gambling and betting and wasting money, and running into debt; but I never cheated or used foul means—to be sure I had not a virago of a wife to taunt me with my ill-luck and goad me to madness."

"Oh, Mr. Otway!" pleaded Reuben.

"Well, well, this man may be living still, but his end must be very near. Here are cuttings from newspapers of the time, and my own notes of what publicly transpired. I was Mr. Appersley's worst enemy, was I?—when I blasted my whole life to save his reputation, knowing that, if he were pronounced a suicide, the other black story would be sure to be believed; and so I, his doctor, who chanced to be at hand when he was found dying, swore to heart-disease, swore to a heap of lies, because I was an unprincipled fool, who could only think of my friend and grieve for his faults, and pity the little fatherless boy he had injured and disgraced. It is a simple story. I was a coward, as well as a fool and a scoundrel. There was a buzz and a scandal—a talk of taking up the body, to see if poison could be found; they would have done it in later years, and so I bolted."

"Stay, stay," said Reuben, in a tone that betrayed his grief, "do not try to persuade me that this dreadful story can be true. It is so

long ago—you have forgotten incidents.”

“I have not forgotten one tittle,” interrupted Otway; “and now your lady mother has got at the truth without going to law for it.”

“You are hard upon my mother,” sighed Reuben.

“Has she not been hard on me?” retorted the other—“ay, and on mine? Many old friends were faithful in adversity, and cherished my poor wife and helpless child; but Mrs. Appersley of Five Oaks was not among the number. I have ascertained that neither mother nor daughter ever crossed her threshold after I deserted them.”

“I won’t believe your wicked story!” cried the suffering woman, the tears coursing down her wrinkled cheeks, thick sobs impeding her utterance, and every gesture belying her words.

“But you will believe it,” said Otway. “I can leave all these papers behind me. I am sure they will be quite safe with you. They can be put in the muniment box, along with title-deeds

and other precious documents ; I am not the least afraid of your bringing me to justice."

"Spare us taunts, I beseech you!" cried Reuben.

"Well, well, I have said my say ; and may now shake the dust from my feet."

"It is a bitter night," said the host ; "not weather in which to turn out a dog—surely you will stay?"

"Thank you—thank you very much ; but I must travel many miles before morning. Besides, Mrs. Appersley is only used to entertain honest, respectable people."

"If you'll remain I'll forgive everything," moaned the lady.

"Well, that's handsome," cried Otway, with a hard chuckling laugh, and rising as he spoke ; "but I cannot stay very much longer, for all that."

"You must have food—refreshment of some sort," exclaimed Reuben—"indeed you must!"

"If breaking bread is to be a sign of peace," returned Otway, "so be it ; a biscuit will serve

for that purpose, and a glass of brandy and water might not be undesirable. But in five minutes I must be off."

George Otway quaffed the brandy-and-water as one who, without being a sot, was yet well accustomed to deep potations. When the glass was emptied, he exclaimed,

"You will not forget to-night, or be able altogether to forget me; but on this side the grave we are little likely to meet again. I leave England on Monday, and chose Saturday night for my visit, with a purpose. Sunday is not a good day for a chase, had anybody recognized me. Remember, I am Oldham, the Australian doctor and trader. Be mute as I shall be, and bury the past in the decentest grave you can find."

"Shake hands," murmured Mrs. Appersley, as she stretched forth her long trembling fingers to meet his brawny grasp.

"Good-bye—good-bye," he exclaimed; "and don't fret. As your son observed just now, the trouble was long ago; and perhaps people will

forget the sooner—the sooner they forgive.”

“It seems but yesterday!” moaned the stricken widow—“it’s all more vivid and real than things that happened last week. I forgive you everything—and I am sure you think what you have said; but I should go mad if I believed you. Now, Reuben, Reuben,” she added, “you don’t wish me to lose my senses.”

And then the miserable woman fairly broke down, and flung herself among the sofa cushions, in a paroxysm of weeping.

“I only make things worse,” said Otway. But there was a little necessary delay in getting round the chaise; and a little earnest, low-toned talk between Otway and Reuben in the hall, and then the host made a memorandum of an address in his pocket-book, and the two shook hands.

George Otway passed out into the cold wintry night, with the snow lying white around him, a half moon sinking in the west, and bright stars shining overhead. But he knew every yard of the road over which he had to

drive his hired horse, and Reuben returned to the old parlour, to comfort his mother as best he might.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GLORY OF THE LONG PARLOUR HAS DEPARTED.

For Suffering came, that great iconoclast
That breaks our false gods down, and sets the soul
Full faced towards the Great Father.

E. J. REED.

IT was an hour later, and what had passed between mother and son in the interval need not be told. At last he had recommended her retiring to rest, and had summoned the old servant Rebecca to attend her. Then, with a step made heavy by heaviness of heart, Reuben Appersley mounted to his wife's chamber.

Catherine had not needed any assistance, and had chosen to remain in solitude. Her

thoughts had been busy conjecturing the purpose of George Otway's visit, and reviewing her own condition of life. She had not wept—that is, no tears had coursed down her cheeks, but, if there be such a thing as inward weeping, then, for the hundredth time, she had known it. Her eyes were hot and heavy, as eyes are apt to be that have been much washed by tears, and little sobs had relieved her—sobs that grew out of involuntary sighs. Catherine knew that she had not many months to live, and though, when she had first realized her danger, the blow was sharp, she was now resigned to her fate. Nay, there were times when she felt almost impatient of delay, so strong was the heart yearning to be where “the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.” We can understand that, for wisest ends, the young, as a rule, cling tenaciously to life; and yet, when the fiat has gone forth, they are often as ready to depart as the aged. Thus wisely and pitifully was it ordered in the present instance; yet Catherine was sometimes

oppressed with a sense of perplexed duties, and the consciousness of many things to do in a short space of time. It had always been an element of her character to plan and act for the happiness of others, rather than for self-satisfaction, and her sufferings had but exalted her nature.

Reuben entered the room gently, and seeing that his wife was alone, closed the door immediately, as if with a sense of relief that no third person was present. But Catherine perceived at a glance that something sorrowful had happened, for latterly she had grown very learned in reading his countenance. She had been sitting by the light of the fire and of a single candle, and she rose to light a second candle on the chimney-piece.

"Not for me—not for me," exclaimed Reuben. "I really like your shaded room. Oh! Catherine," he continued, and resting a hand on her shoulder as he spoke, "I have terrible things to tell you; can you bear them?"

"Dear Reuben," she replied, "I can bear anything it may comfort you to tell me."

"Yes, that I believe; and besides, it is right you should know. I should feel ashamed of my own falsehood and cowardice if I hid the truth from you. But oh! it is hard to utter. Catherine, guess the worst that George Otway could have to reveal, and you will have guessed the truth!" And, fairly overcome, Reuben wept like a woman.

"Sit down—sit down," said Catherine, half forcing him into the easy-chair she had just occupied; and then she knelt beside him and passed her arm round his neck. "My poor dear Reuben!" she murmured; "oh! that I could bear all this sorrow for you!"

"Bear it with me, like a true, good wife," he murmured; "and oh! be good to my mother, for she is sorely stricken."

"I will."

"See how wildly I talk, quite forgetting how ill you still are, wanting all kindness yourself."

"I am weak in body," returned Catherine, "but I think not ill in mind. It will do me good to be of use."

"No, you never were weak in mind," said Reuben; "I know that now. I recollect your wise words about 'the moss of forgetfulness.' It maddens me to think that my own folly has brought down the blow!"

"But your intentions were so good; and your own life has been so blameless," cried Catherine, instinctively desiring to restore his self-respect.

"My poor mother!" sighed Reuben.

"Shall I go to her?" asked Catherine.

"No, not to-night; she is better left to Rebecca. Besides, I want to tell you all, everything the man said—I want you to think for me, and say if it really does seem true."

And now Reuben Appersley, being a little calmer, related the story which had so wounded and shamed him; and when it was told, Catherine was constrained to believe it.

"Oh! Reuben," she exclaimed, "let 'the moss of forgetfulness' grow fast again, if it will. See how mercifully the truth has been shown to you—without public betrayal. Dear Reuben,

by-and-by you will be happy—so much happier than you can dream of at present. People in my state of health have prevision—I know they have—and I see clearly a future of joy before you.”

“A future of joy for me!” cried Reuben, in a tone of incredulity. “Ah! now *you* are dreaming.”

“No, not dreaming—only clear-seeing. I think it with a feeling that is akin to certain knowledge; and in reward for my prophecy, when the happy days come, think of me a little kindly—that is all I ask.” And Catherine kissed his cheek tenderly and calmly, as a sister might.

“I do think of you kindly,” said Reuben, pressing her hand—“more kindly and fondly than you seem to suppose. One great trouble drew us apart, but I feel that in a certain sort of way this other trouble brings us together again. To you only can I fly for sympathy!”

“That is right—that is right,” replied Catherine. “I could have rejoiced over your happi-

ness, though it had been quite lonely; but it would have been heart-breaking to think that you did not bring your sorrows to me. Now we quite understand each other, I know; and whatever happens, things between us will henceforth go on well."

"God bless you, Catherine!"

"I know I can be of use," she continued; "and that conviction is always a comfort. Your mother will want much attention, and all the sympathy of a daughter. I shall have strength given me, you will see."

"It has been given you already, I think," said her husband. "Ah! you do not know how much you help me!"

"Then you must let me advise a little," she resumed. "Seek rest; after a night's repose things will look clearer."

"Rest!—how can I sleep!" he exclaimed.

"Oh! yes, you will," said Catherine; and she was right. She spoke from the experience of great sorrows, and knew that they exhaust the frame, so that the very weariness is an opiate.

A fretful indecision about some trifling affair will banish sleep ten times more effectually than a heavy trouble, for which no remedy is apparent.

The next day Catherine was downstairs a little earlier than usual, not greatly so to attract marked attention, but still an hour or two after breakfast. If she was overtaxing her strength, the fact did not show. Pay-day might come, but the excitement of having a duty to perform kept her up for the present. When she entered the old parlour, she found Mrs. Appersley in her accustomed chair, and with her work-box open beside her. But she was unemployed, her hand playing listlessly with the fringe of her apron. It was evident she had been weeping, though now her eyes were tearless; but there were twitchings about the muscles of her face which revealed mental disturbance.

Catherine approached her husband's mother with a little more tenderness of manner than belonged to her usual morning greeting—only a little more, and yet it seemed too much, for

the elder lady raised her hand with a slight gesture of impatience, saying,

"There, my dear, I know you are sorry for me. But we won't talk about all that has happened—at least, not often. I may have occasion to speak about painful things, and then I will. It was right Reuben should tell you all that man said—it was my wish that you should know. As Reuben's wife it was right and proper that you should be informed. Don't you think so yourself?"

"It would have pained me very much to feel that I was not trusted," said Catherine. "Now at least I can share the trouble."

"Yes, yes. But I have come to the conclusion that Mr. Otway is a little touched in his head. The poor man has had a hard life, and it is not to be expected that he should remember things which happened twenty years ago quite clearly. Have you not heard how cunning mad people are?"

"Yes, I have heard they are cunning," said Catherine. And as she looked at Mrs. Appers-

ley, she could not help speculating as to how far the widow's mind had maintained its balance under the blow which had been inflicted on her pride; as to how far *her* words were "cunning," in the crazy sense. In the full glow of her faculties, Mrs. Appersley would not have been guilty of a subterfuge to save herself from torment. If it be true that characters have the "defects" of their high qualities, faults have sometimes their high attributes; and Reuben's mother was too proud to be false. But her mind was too narrow to be very strong. Perhaps her hold on general sanity was "not allowing herself to believe," and that she would have been quite crazed had she realized Otway's revelation in the same way Reuben and Catherine understood it.

Nevertheless, there was one little circumstance which touched Catherine profoundly, and suggested the suffering which was not expressed. The gold cup was nowhere to be seen, and the bracket which had supported it, having hinges, now hung down.

The glory of the long parlour was indeed departed; but Mrs. Appersley soon discovered that a blank may have associations as painful as an object. Besides, there was the portrait of her husband remaining, which, for shame's sake, she would not have removed. The room she had loved so well became unbearable to her, and before a fortnight had passed, the drawing-room proper became the general sitting-room of the family.

CHAPTER XVII.

CATHERINE LEAVES FIVE OAKS.

A lingering death few long endure,
Whose hearts beats high, and blood runs pure.
CAPT. H. SPALDING.

IT was at this juncture that some home letter, and some chit-chat talk, suggested that Jane Freeth should be invited to Five Oaks. In very truth Catherine needed sisterly companionship more even than poor Mrs. Freeth required Jenny's society ; and thus it came to pass that in the early days of the new year Jane arrived, as it was said, to stay a month or two with the Appersleys. But there was a quiet understanding that she was to prolong her visit if circumstances rendered her doing so desirable.

Mrs. Appersley had heard of Jenny's engagement to Frank Raybrooke, and yet had hardly realized that the young girl had passed out of childhood. It was with a start of surprise that she recognised in the well-grown, graceful guest the niece so often lovingly called "little Jenny."

"I wonder," she exclaimed more than once, "no one ever told me that she was the image of Catherine. Reuben, don't you see it?"

"Yes, mother; there is a very strong family likeness, certainly, and it has grown more marked lately," Reuben answered on one occasion; "yet I think she reminds one of what poor Catherine was rather than of what she is."

"Reuben," said his mother, "I don't like to hear you say 'poor Catherine' in that desponding way. Of course she'll get well, as soon as we have Spring weather, so that she may be more in the air."

"I hope so, I am sure—meanwhile I think Jenny's visit will do her good. In fact, I believe we are all of us the better for the sunshine of her pleasant face."

And this was very true. It was surprising how, in the course of a few days, the happiness of the girls' own nature seemed to have shed some subtle influence on those around her. Be it remembered she was in utter ignorance of the deeper sorrows of her elders, knowing only that Catherine was ill, and had to be cared for in every tender way. So she would read to her and write for her, and perform little services, as if rendering them were the greatest of pleasures and privileges.

Then in the evening she would play to them, and no one with ear and taste would have despised Jenny's music. A fine-toned grand piano had been one of Reuben's earliest gifts to his wife, and for some time after her marriage Catherine had "kept up" her music, and sometimes the sisters played brilliant duets together; but it was significant of Catherine's state that the exertion was too much for her, so that after a little while Jenny was the only player. Fine classical music was rather wasted on Mrs. Appersley, but she sometimes liked what she called

tunes, and praised them accordingly. Therefore Jenny in her good-nature ransacked her music-books, and her memory, for old familiar airs that would please her aunt.

"Oh," she exclaimed, on several occasions, "you should hear Miss Otway play these simple things, she makes them speak with expression and meaning I never knew in them before I heard her."

"My dear," said her aunt, who was always chary of praising young people, "you play them very nicely."

"If I do, aunt, it is because Miss Otway taught me. Now here is a piece," she continued, "that I think you will like. Catherine, dear," she added, turning to her sister, "do you remember that cold foggy morning, just before you were married, when I was learning a new piece? I think I can play it a little better now than I did then."

And without waiting for further encouragement, she struck some opening chords, and soon glided into the melody of Burns' song, beginning,

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot,"

and played for a few minutes, as if herself delighting in the tones she produced.

Music and poetry, and indeed all art-creations, are of the nature of spiritual mysteries, that appeal to the inner life in an incomprehensible manner. Certain vibrations, in a certain melodious and rhythmical order, and, lo! a melody is produced that can waken memories and wring the heart! Thus was it on the present occasion, and when Catherine looked timidly at her husband, she found him gazing at her with mournful tenderness, and she knew that he, too, was thinking of that dull wintry morning when she had striven to break her engagement.

But it was not only in connection with music that Hester's name was frequently mentioned by Jenny. She really loved her governess, who, in these latter months of sickness and sorrow, had been more than ever the friend of the whole family; and it was hardly possible for her to relate home-news, and give interest-

ing details, without mentioning "Miss Otway." And if the words were, "Miss Otway thought so and so," or "said such a thing," the speech and the thought were sure to seem wise. Then she had quite a history to tell of Hester having become independent, of having had a mysterious interview with her father, who was going back to Australia to make more money still; with a little wonderment on Jenny's part why she had been requested not to talk of the affair "out of the family."

One day Mrs. Appersley a little surprised Reuben and Catherine by remarking,

"I am interested in Hester Otway. I should like to see her. I wish you would invite her to stay with us."

"I should be delighted to do so," cried Catherine.

"Let me write," said Jenny, clapping her hands with glee at the idea. And a cordial invitation was written, and as cordially accepted. Thus, on a lovely day in very early Spring, Hester Otway at last "crossed the threshold"

of the house of which Reuben Appersley was master.

It was the sort of day that February sometimes seems to borrow from April, and that gladdens all animate nature, even though we know that biting winds and frosty nights are still in store. A day on which we drink joy from the golden and amethyst cups of the opening crocuses, and scent the shy violets and bold hyacinths with delight, and revel in the clamour of the song-birds rejoicing that Spring has awakened. Hester Otway was not at all a superstitious person, not given to notice omens, and yet I think she was conscious of a sense of satisfaction at the bright weather which heralded her coming to Five Oaks.

She had never understood—other than very vaguely—the reason of that coolness on the part of her father's old friend, which had prevented her from being invited to the house in earlier days; but in addition to the fact that Hester was by nature very amiable and forgiving, Reuben's mother was idealized in her mind,

unconsciously, perhaps, but still absolutely. Besides, it was her friend Catherine, by whose sick bed she had lately watched, who now ostensibly invited her, and she came, if with mingled feelings, yet, on the whole, very pleasurable ones.

But it soon became apparent that Mrs. Appersley had taken a great liking to the girl whom once she had seemed to hate, but who now became her chosen companion, almost from morning till night. Few of us know much about the springs of action in our fellow-creatures, but it is safe to believe that Mrs. Appersley felt stings of conscience with regard to her past neglect of Otway's unoffending daughter, and that she desired to make amends for it, if she could. Narrow-minded as she was, and harsh and hard as she could be, she had a keen sense of justice in all matters which came within the grasp of her understanding. Thus to feel herself convicted of injustice was a pain and humiliation she could only soften by generous kindness now.

It was a real gratification to Catherine to

find Hester becoming so great a favourite with Reuben's mother, and the circumstance threw the two sisters more and more together. As might be expected, when they were *tête-à-tête* there was a great outpouring of her own happiness on Jenny's part, with the brightest of castle-building for the future; and never did elder sister give truer, deeper sympathy than Catherine gave now.

Much was she struck by the mental development which had taken place during the last few months; there was a maturity of thought in Jenny, allied to great simplicity, which made her companionship very sweet to Catherine. It would have made a touching picture, had a limner sketched them, the two sisters, so much alike, and yet so different, both in the deep mourning still worn for the young brother—the elder fading away, the younger bearing her betrothal ring, and with the rose on her cheek growing deeper when she talked of him she loved, or opened the locket she constantly wore.

Of course they talked of many things, and of other persons besides Frank Raybrooke. Phoebe's sad marriage was a frequent theme, and Algeron, in connection with his brother, was often mentioned. One day Jenny exclaimed,

"Do you know, I fancy papa does not like Algeron as much as he used to do, and I am so sorry!"

Catherine was silent for a few moments, then she controlled herself, and said calmly,

"Why do you think so?"

"Because, when I have been writing to Frank," replied Jenny, "and have asked papa if he had any message, he has always said, 'No, don't give any message from me—I would rather you did not,' or something of that kind. What can it be, I wonder?"

"Something, no doubt, that will wear out in time," cried Catherine; "it would be a bitter thing for papa not to be friends with your husband's brother."

"And such a brother! Oh! Catherine, you

do not know how good and generous he is," returned Jenny.

"Yes, I do," said her sister. And in the silence of a wakeful night Catherine came to a resolution. She determined to confide in Jenny, so that through all the future she might know how cruelly Catherine had been stricken. The story was told as a solemn charge for Jane to defend her sister's memory, should it ever be aspersed, and Janet Gillespie was instructed to repeat all she knew to Jenny when Catherine should be no more. Janet was beginning to realize Catherine's condition, and "when I shall be gone" was a little phrase she often had to hear.

One of the "bits of news" that Hester had brought from town was that Hubert Freeth was thinking of giving up Telford House. Ever since poor Teddy's loss, Mrs. Freeth had felt oppressed by the associations of the child's illness and death, and even her husband was conscious of painful memories never likely to be shaken off while their home was unchanged.

He was going to take a house in the suburbs, whence he could still go to his office every day.

Now this allusion to little Teddy's illness and death struck upon Catherine's unselfish heart with a singular shock. What if she should have much suffering "at the last?"—what if her funeral ceremonies should throw a dark shadow over the home which she wished to be bright?

Catherine formed her plans, taking only Janet Gillespie into her entire confidence. Very quietly, and by rather slow degrees, many things were set in order. And meanwhile the doctor came daily "to watch the case;" and Mr. Darwin, the vicar, called frequently, and so did his wife; and Catherine learnt to estimate their worth. She wondered how she ever could have thought Mr. Darwin commonplace or awkward, for she found him eloquent when the greatest of themes had to be freely discussed, and she thanked him with the fervent gratitude such help as that he gave always elicits from the heart which has opened to receive it.

The days had lengthened; the trees were robed in their delicate green, and bright blossoms were perfuming the air, when Catherine intimated that she should like to go to the sea-side. Yes, to quiet little Shinglebeach, which was so near London that Reuben and her own family could frequently see her.

"Dear Reuben," she exclaimed, "let me have my will in this, and do not fear for me at all. We can take a little house, and with Janet to manage for me, I shall have every comfort, I am sure. You must attend to your Parliamentary duties; but I know mamma and Jane will often be with me."

"If you are strong enough to bear the journey, the plan is good, I think," said her husband, "especially if you really like the idea, and wish it carried out so much."

"I do wish it carried out just as I say, for the reasons I give—and some others," replied Catherine. "You know what company I always find in the sea."

"I am afraid my poor mother will miss us all," observed Reuben.

of Reuben's mother, nor was Mrs. Appersley quite unmoved. All except Hester were departing; but, to be sure, Hester had become a host in herself.

Poor Floss, always mournful at the sight of packed boxes and travelling preparations, was showing her distress in canine fashion when Catherine exclaimed,

"I should so like to take Floss with me—may I?"

"Oh! by all means, my dear, if you like to be troubled with the dog," returned Mrs. Appersley. "It is a long time since she has cared for anyone in the house but yourself."

Happily, Floss, having no boxes to pack, was ready for her great joy at a moment's notice.

CHAPTER XVIII.

OLD AND YOUNG.

He that serves well, need not ask his wages.

GEORGE HERBERT.

IT will be remembered that Lionel Freeth was very dear to his sister Catherine; and, notwithstanding her illness, she had corresponded with him frequently. Also, she had written sometimes to Aline Brindley, not choosing to let the "coolness" between their mothers interfere with their friendship. Aline had written affectionately in reply; but many things were happening around her which she did not dare to commit to paper. If we look in at Mrs.

Brindley's residence, we may divine some of those plans and wishes which were testing her daughter's fealty to Lionel.

It was again the height of the London season, and Mrs. Brindley's little drawing-room was set out to the best advantage. Thanks to the worldly tact which had been exercised during the last few years—and notably to the improvement of opportunities while she was intimate with the Freeths—she had a considerable number of visiting acquaintances. And, although she attempted very little in the way of returning hospitalities, she and Aline were really a good deal sought after. A refined, accomplished girl, with some pretensions to beauty, is usually a welcome guest; and a sprightly “woman of the world” is in many circles hardly less an acquisition. Thus, they had been out a great deal; and Aline had been so much admired that her mother was more certain than ever that she would be “thrown away” were she to engage herself to Lionel Freeth. So thought Mrs Brindley now—though

we know how different were her views three years ago.

It is sad to tell, but there had been several painful scenes between Aline and her mother on the subject of the wealthy, middle-aged suitor with a "handle to his name," of whom mention has already been made; and as on this particular day it was rather expected that he would call, Aline had intimated her intention of not remaining in the room if he came. When a man has the sanction of a mother to his addresses, and has not sufficient delicacy to submit to a young girl's rejection, her plight is one of the pitiable things of earth.

But, though three or four ordinary visitors presented themselves—and thus the afternoon was whiled away—the personage hoped for by Mrs. Brindley did not appear; and perhaps it was the disappointment which chafed her temper, and made her impatient of contradiction. Certain it was that, when later in the day, quite beyond the canonical hours for receiving visitors, Mrs. Kar—by appointment—

arrived, she found the hostess in one of her least amiable moods.

When Mrs. Brindley and her daughter were quite alone, Mrs. Kar now often dined and spent the evening with them. Aline had been given to understand that she was some distant relation who had been long abroad, but, in the early days of their intercourse, Aline had identified her as the "faded woman" who had brought the mysterious letter for Hester Otway to Telford House. Mrs. Brindley was aware of the circumstance, though she frankly admitted she should not have known her again, so little had she observed the strange messenger; but she warned Aline that, as Mrs. Kar had been entrusted with a very confidential mission, it was better not to talk of the incident. Nevertheless, Aline felt sure that Mrs. Kar remembered the "cup of cold water," and knew that the "cup-bearer" had recognised her. There could be no doubt they were singularly attracted towards each other, growing more attached every day. Perhaps Mrs. Brindley would have

been a little jealous of the elder lady's influence had she ever thought that it could be exercised against herself. And then there were those heavy little bags, still ready to pour out gold-dust or nuggets when an extra new dress was needed, or a darling bit of point lace; surely these were reasons why Mrs. Kar should be always a welcome guest, more or less.

Now this day Aline was unable to hide her distress, for Mrs. Brindley had spoken to her with unusual severity. She had been taunted with her preference for Lionel Freeth, who was declared unworthy of her regard—a ne'er-do-well, not much better than Cuthbert Rawlins; and at this accusation Aline's spirit had risen to defend the absent. No wonder that Mrs. Kar recognised the state of the domestic atmosphere, even before Mrs. Brindley spoke to her on the subject.

But if Mrs. Brindley thought that the elder lady would aid her plans by influencing Aline, she very quickly found herself mistaken. The two ladies were *tête-à-tête*—for soon after dinner

Aline, on the plea of a bad head-ache, had retired to her room, and Mrs. Kar had listened patiently to all the arguments her hostess had urged.

"And now, Susan," she exclaimed,—and there seemed some mysterious power to soften her in the Christian name which she never used when there were listeners,—“hear me. Believe me I would rather die some cruel death—or worse, disclose my own life as a warning—than that the marriage you contemplate should take place. I mean what I say literally. My words are no mere figure of speech.”

“Then I am sorry I spoke to you of the affair,” said Mrs. Brindley. “I thought you would help me. Instead of which, you are as wrong-headed as the girl herself.”

“Wrong-headed, am I?” returned Mrs. Kar with a sigh. “Nay, I think I see clearly, as I know I feel strongly. I say that to force a girl into marriage with a man she does not love, is at all times a great sin, for it is the wilful thrusting of a young creature into a fierce fur-

nance of temptation. But here the wrong is aggravated—for the man is unworthy of her love.”

“Nonsense; nonsense,” exclaimed Mrs. Brindley; “he has been dissipated, we know, but he is so in love with Aline that he would be a reformed character if married to her.”

“Believe it not,” cried Mrs. Kar; “there would only be a wife’s heart to break, in addition to his other evil deeds.”

“How should you know?” said Mrs. Brindley.

“How should I know? Susan, do you forget my history? Why, that which I plead against, is the old, sad story over again, with hardly a difference;” and, in the tones of the speaker there was something which pleaded more even than the words.

“Oh, but Aline is very different from you,” said Mrs. Brindley.

“Not so different as you think,” replied Mrs. Kar; “in my heart of hearts I believe that at her age I was as pure and good as she is. But

I had a woman's soul that hungered for love ; and so, believe me, has she. Her case even is the more desperate because she loves another."

"She shall not marry Lionel Freeth," said Mrs. Brindley.

"You say so," replied Mrs. Kar, after a short pause, "and yet I think she will be his wife."

"Not if I can help it," continued Mrs. Brindley; "and Aline would never be disobedient. But what makes you speak so positively?"

"I prophesy from what I see and know and think. Oh, Susan, I am grateful to you for all you have done to make my lot easier, but I want a greater boon still. It is that for all our sakes you will yield in this."

"I cannot."

"And yet my prophecy will come true. You will see. Meanwhile my heart bleeds for the poor girl," continued Mrs. Kar.

"I think rather it ought to bleed for me," cried Mrs. Brindley with asperity. "I declare you have made me quite miserable—just, too, when I wanted help and sympathy, and I think your

insinuations are quite wicked—as if it were possible Aline could—could—ever forget herself as you did.”

“Oh, Susan, forbear!”

“Then you should not provoke me,” continued Mrs. Brindley. “Of course I am sorry if I hurt you—but you have contrived to make me wretched, that you have,” and Mrs. Brindley burst into tears. She was evidently of opinion that it was a most inhuman thing thus to wound her with the shafts of truth.

“I freely forgive your anger towards myself,” said Mrs. Kar, after a short pause, “but will you promise to think of my words?”

“In the sense of yielding to them—certainly not,” returned the hostess.

“Then we will say no more on the subject,” remarked Mrs. Kar; and soon afterwards she added, “It is growing late, I had better wish you good night.”

But when she arrived at her lodgings she did not immediately seek repose. On the contrary, she paced up and down her little parlour for

a considerable time, as was her habit under mental disturbance ; and when, after midnight, she pressed her pillow, she slept but little. She had, however, come to a very painful resolution, which, before many hours had passed, was duly carried out. The writing a rather long letter unnerved her to the last degree, and when her trembling fingers had posted it, she almost recoiled at the recollection of her own courage.

That evening old Thomas Freeth sat in his study. The reader may remember the room where he had gazed with emotion on a certain miniature ; but just now he was very differently occupied. He was reading a medical treatise with more absorbed attention than might have been expected from a non-professional man, sometimes heaving a little sigh, and at others feeling his own pulse. Presently the postman's loud rap was heard, and the next minute a servant delivered a letter.

It was a long letter, and when the signature was recognized the medical treatise dropped to the ground—to lie there for a considerable time.

The letter was even more absorbing than the treatise had been, and to judge from the expression of the reader's countenance, surprise, pleasure, pain, were all called forth by its perusal. It was a simple story, simply told, and old Mr. Freeth was called upon to use his great influence to ascertain if Lionel Freeth was as devoted to Aline Brindley as the writer believed him to be; and if so, then to take measures to promote their marriage. Towards the end of the letter occurred this passage:—

“To the utmost of my ability I shall avoid our meeting. But if, from unforeseen circumstances, we should once again be face to face, do not dread weakness from me, but suffer yourself to be introduced as to a stranger—to Mrs. Kar, the obscure relation. Oh! that the good deed I ask of you may be permitted! Oh! that our hands may be considered by the All Wise clean enough to help the young, and good, and innocent! But I have thought—and it is one of my comforting fancies—that, even as clean work cleanses the soiled hand, so, when God

deigns to employ us in good works, he cleanses us at the same time. Farewell !”

Many times did the old man read this letter before thrusting it into his pocket. When this was done he drew writing materials towards him, and taking a large sheet of paper, he wrote at the top, “Provisional, in case of sudden death.” After a minute’s pause, the pen flew rapidly over three pages, and the long letter was sealed, directed to his nephew, Hubert Freeth, and immediately locked up in a private drawer.

Then, ringing for a servant, he wrote a few words on a slip of paper, and directed that they should be telegraphed to Cambridge the first thing in the morning. This done he drew the letter which had so moved him from his pocket, and read it again and again ; then he lighted a taper, twisted the letter into a consumable form, and placed a corner in the flame. It blazed so rapidly that he had only just time to drop the tinder-like remains into the empty fender.

And now Thomas Freeth picked up the medi-

cal treatise, and smoothed its crumpled leaves; and then, from some private recess, he drew forth a small bottle, and pouring a few drops of its contents into a little water, drank it off. It was a rather potent medicine, which he only took occasionally.

It was the day after Lionel Freeth had passed certain examinations with great *éclat* that he received a telegram from his great-uncle, requesting a visit from him as speedily as possible. Now a request from Uncle Thomas was looked upon by the Freeth family very much in the light of a royal command, and Lionel lost no time in coming to London. Accordingly early in the afternoon he presented himself at his uncle's residence. After the ordinary greeting and mutual inquiries, with their rejoinders, the old man exclaimed,

"Yes, I thought the examination was over, or perhaps I might have waited a day or two. But the truth is, Lionel, that at my age there is no time to be lost in setting one's worldly affairs in order. Now there are one or two arrangements

I greatly desire to see carried out; but before doing anything, I wish to ask you a few questions, and the more frankly and explicitly you answer me, the better will it be for all parties. In the first place, do you desire to marry?"

"Were I in a position to marry," replied Lionel, hardly concealing his astonishment at his uncle's words, "it would be the first wish of my heart."

"Good. Are you positively engaged?"

"My own heart is engaged fervently and unchangeably; but I have not dared—that is, I have not thought myself justified in extorting a pledge from her I love; and yet I hope more than I fear."

"I suppose you understand each other," said the uncle with a smile.

"I suppose we do," replied Lionel; "and if only her mother would have the same faith in me that I think she once had, all might be well. Uncle, it is delightful news to find that you wish me to marry; for unfortunately my father thinks there is plenty of time."

"I should like to know who the lady is," rejoined Mr. Freeth, "before I precisely say I wish you to marry. Have I ever seen her?"

"Once, I believe."

"Is it Aline Brindley?"

"Yes—oh yes, but, Uncle, how could you possibly guess?"

"That is my own affair. I may admit that I fell in love with the young lady myself—that is, in a 'Great-Uncleish sort of way.' "

"Then you do admire her," cried Lionel, his handsome face beaming with delight. "Oh, I am so happy! Perhaps, with you for my friend to persuade for me, I need not wait till middle age. Of course I should wish to be called to the Bar, and even to have some practice before I marry."

"Yes, that might be desirable, but I do not know that you need wait for it. This is what I have on my mind to do. I wish to purchase an estate in one of the home counties, and entail it on your father and his heirs male. Thus by the time you are Lord Chief Justice, or

Attorney-General, or something of the sort, you will probably be its owner. Now, this is not bad for an expectation; but if you marry Aline Brindley, I will give you ten thousand pounds to settle on her, and help you in other ways until you make an income."

"Uncle!" It was the only word Lionel could utter.

"Probably, under these circumstances," continued the old man, "Mrs. Brindley will not be obdurate. You had better tell your father I want to see him, and we will have things put in train. We must wait till there is a suitable estate in the market, and an old man's life is always precarious. Still we can make provisional arrangements, and I am sure your father would carry out my wishes if I do not live to execute them."

"But I hope and trust that you may live many years to see the happiness you will have promoted," cried Lionel. "My dear, generous Uncle, do not talk despondingly of your own life. Why, I never saw you look better."

"That may be, but I am growing old, never-

theless. Now I shall dismiss you, because I want you to send your father to me to-day, if possible."

It would, I think, be wearisome to describe minutely certain little scenes which the reader who takes any interest in Lionel and Aline can very well imagine. His uncle's proposal to give forty or fifty thousand pounds for an estate to be entailed on Hubert Freeth and his heirs, was as agreeable to that individual as it would be to the generality of "fathers of families;" and, as Aline was really beloved, more or less, by all the Freeths, the estrangement having only been from her mother, Lionel's choice, so tangibly approved by Uncle Thomas, was cordially approved by his parents. For Lionel's sake, Mrs. Freeth consented to make advances towards a reconciliation, and, as the advances were simultaneous with a formal offer of marriage to Aline, accompanied by the announcement of Lionel's improved prospects, Mrs. Brindley accepted the olive branch with a consummate display of worldly tact.

Suddenly as the aspect of affairs had changed, she never lost her presence of mind. Of course the elderly suitor was now quietly dismissed, for, as she told him with seeming regret, she had been unable to influence her daughter. And, with regard to her reconciliation with Mrs. Freeth, that, she said, was a pure unmixed delight; the coolness, which was all owing to a silly misunderstanding, had almost broken her heart. As for Lionel, everyone knew how fond she had been of him; and it was only for the good of the young people that she had kept them apart. It was so much better there should be no entanglement of an engagement while Lionel was at college, and before they knew their own minds.

And so it came to pass that, in a very few days, Mrs. Brindley was again the welcome guest at Telford House, and treated as an intimate friend. Yes, but with a difference. The spell of her influence was broken. Mrs. Freeth had learned to act on her own judgment in half a hundred matters, on which formerly she had

too often found herself relying on Mrs. Brindley for advice. And the change had many happy results. The exercise of independent thought and action had cheered her drooping spirits, and actually strengthened her mind.

Hubert Freeth saw the development, and was delighted with it. Their hearts had been drawn more and more together as they sorrowed for little Teddy; their mutual anxiety about Catherine and grief for Phoebe were additional ties between them; but in the prospects of Lionel as they were now opening, they could together rejoice, in much the same manner as they had rejoiced over Jenny's engagement.

The anxiety with which Mrs. Kar watched events can scarcely be over-estimated; but too much was at stake for her to be other than very cautious. She refrained for some days from visiting her daughter, but when she presented herself she found Mrs. Brindley charged with a budget of news.

"You don't seem half so much surprised as I expected," exclaimed Mrs. Brindley, when she

had duly related the improvement in Lionel's position, and her own concession. "When you were persuading me to consent, you never could have foreseen all that has happened."

"Perhaps not, exactly," replied Mrs. Kar; "and yet I felt sure that sooner or later you would yield. It was a conviction I had."

"Tell me," said Mrs. Brindley, after a pause, during which, apparently, she had some puzzling thought—"Tell me, had you been dreaming of Aline in any remarkable way?"

"No, nothing of the sort."

"I only asked," resumed Mrs. Brindley, "because, though I never had a prophetic dream myself, I have heard of such things. Well," she continued, "you were something like a witch, that is all I can say."

It is very probable that Mrs. Brindley had henceforth increased respect for her mother's judgment.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST DAYS AT SHINGLEBEACH.—THE LAST
BITE OF THE SNAKE.

Why should we fear the grave? It is the bed
Where the King lay in state, with Angels round,
And hallowed it for evermore to us.

Why should we fear the grave? It is the way
The conqueror went, and made the very dust
Grow starry with the sparkle of his splendour,
And left the darkness conscious of His presence.
We can look down upon the grave now He
Has plumbed it, spanned it, one foot on each side.

GERALD MASSEY.

ONE of the pleasantest houses in Shingle-
beach was selected for Catherine's sojourn.
Drawing-rooms with folding-doors commanded
a double view—from the front balconied win-

dows the wide expanse of ocean, with always shipping in the offing; from the one back window corn-fields and gardens stretching to the undulating horizon of a Kentish landscape. Janet Gillespie was installed housekeeper as well as head nurse, and had been deputed to engage the necessary servants; and, very soon, the invalid found herself established in what deserved to be called a home. In it she was a sort of queen, since it was the aim of everyone about her to please and serve her.

The distance from London was so short that friends could easily come to her, and return in the day; and, besides that everyone whom Catherine desired to see, did so visit her; Mrs. Freeth or Jane, and sometimes both, often remained with her for days together. Her husband also came down frequently, but she entreated him not to neglect his Parliamentary duties—not to be anxious about her, and to thoroughly believe she was cared for in every possible way. Of course the news of Lionel's good fortune, and his engagement to Aline,

duly reached her, and her heart was gladdened, as it always was by the happiness of others. She wrote a charming letter to Aline on the occasion, though the doing so was a considerable exertion. In truth, her strength was ebbing away very fast.

For a few weeks she was able to go out regularly in a bath-chair, and visitors who came to the little sea-bathing town, rather for holiday-making than for health, often noticed the poor invalid with mild pity, and a faint, wondering lament at the early decay of one so young and fair. Generally she was attended by two or three loving friends, and always by the faithful Floss. There was something deeply pathetic in the attachment of the old dog, something semi-human in its quiet ways, its little moaning cries when any attempt was made to remove it from Catherine's side. Even at night it slept at her door, and would not rest elsewhere.

But the day came when Catherine ceased to go out, and she lay on a sofa near the front

windows, with Floss at her feet. It was when she was in this condition, that, on one of her father's visits she pleaded at last successfully for her sister Phoebe. Thrice before she had urged him to forgive the marriage, and he had refused to listen. But Hubert Freeth was softened now—he could not refuse the dying Catherine a boon so near her heart. And as he was a man who never gave or forgave in a half-hearted way, he not only saw Phoebe, and received her in his house, but set about serving her husband in a substantial manner, only making it a condition that what remained of Phoebe's fortune should be settled on herself, absolutely. It would appear that Cuthbert Rawlins had shown, since his marriage, more steadiness of conduct than had been expected from him, and Hubert Freeth was willing to hope that the case of his son-in-law might prove an exceptional one, and his future atone for the past.

Her success so gladdened Catherine that it seemed really to have done her a physical good. For three or four days everyone about her,

except Janet, thought her really better; but Janet knew exactly what the flickering of the flame meant. Happily, the affairs of this world were all settled. And on the day when Catherine had for the last time received the Communion, she had indicated the spot in the little churchyard where she would wish to be buried. It was the first Sunday after coming to Shingle-beach—the only occasion on which she had been equal to the fatigue of attending Divine service.

Only a week since her father, with tearful eyes, had kissed her fondly; only three days since Reuben had been there, full of tender solicitude, but less apprehensive than Hubert Freeth had been, and Catherine is asking for more air, though the sea-breeze flutters the curtains as if in boisterous play. Mrs. Freeth is holding one of Catherine's hands, and weeping bitterly, while Jenny is kneeling by the couch, attempting to administer a restorative. Janet is there also, calm and pale, self-possessed, and ready to act or endure. She has just sent for

the accustomed medical aid, but it is long in coming.

It is evening, but not night, for over the sea, in the north-west, the glow of a glorious sunset still remains, and, if Catherine's eyes are open, they must rest upon it. Everything is so still. There is only the faint sound of an occasional tramp on the pavement, or of a vehicle in the road, that blends with the low, rhythmical beat of the waves on the beach. Flat Summer waves of the receding tide they are, that seem to cling lovingly to the pebbly shore, and only ebb at a supreme bidding.

Catherine's mind wandered; or was there sense in her words? The listeners were too dull to comprehend.

"The message of the sea!" she murmured. "Yes, yes, I hear it now. And ONE walks there. Look, look!" And again, "Such peace!" And, "Oh! what a sunrise!"

They were her last words, uttered with almost her last breath. For Catherine there was no earthly sunrise; the morning beams could

only shine on the pale, senseless form which Janet's loving hands had composed, and attired in stainless white.

There is no need to dwell on funeral ceremonies, and the grief of weeping women. According to her wish, Catherine was buried at Shinglebeach, on the sunny side of the churchyard, in the spot she herself had selected. Tearful relations stood round the grave, but there was an unbidden mourner among them. Floss had followed the funeral procession, for a time unheeded, and when all was over it was only by force that she could be removed from the spot where the coffin had been lowered. And again and again the faithful creature escaped from the house, to keep lonely watch at the grave.

But, though buried at Shinglebeach, Catherine's funeral sermon was preached in Meadshire by Mr. Darwin, in the little village church in which she had so often worshipped. The pulpit was hung with black for the occasion, and nearly all the congregation wore some sort of mourning. A tablet in memory of Catherine,

wife of Reuben Appersley, Esq., has also been placed just above the family pew.

Reuben rallied from his loss in due time, as was to be expected from a young man of only seven or eight-and-twenty, and though his mother really felt her daughter-in-law's death nearly as much as probably she was now capable of feeling anything, she consoled herself greatly with the society of Hester Otway.

Jane Freeth asked one favour of her sister's husband, and that was that she might be permitted to keep Floss. It seemed a trifling boon in requital of her devotion, and was readily granted. But Jenny's sisterly duties were not quite ended. On her—assisted by Janet Gillespie—devolved a task always mournful, and sometimes overpowering—the examination and distribution of the personal belongings of the dead.

It was found, however, less trying than had been expected, and not at all troublesome. Catherine had taken few valuables to Shinglebeach, and when her wardrobe at Five Oaks

was opened, rich dresses and other costly articles of apparel were found arranged in a certain order which facilitated removal. A number of little trinkets were sealed up and directed to relatives and friends, each with a few words of affectionate remembrance; but costly jewels—and the emerald cross was among them—which had been presented to her by her husband, as well as some other valuable ornaments, mostly her wedding presents, were enclosed in a casket, which was superscribed, "For Reuben's wife, with Catherine's love."

When the casket was brought to him, Reuben was greatly moved, but he struggled against any display of emotion, and said with tolerable calmness, "This is quite characteristic of her generous nature—she was the least selfish woman I ever knew."

It has been told that Phoebe had been forgiven her rash clandestine marriage, and for a little time it seemed that she was to prove an exception to common rules, and that her life

would open out into something fairer and brighter than might have been expected. Undoubtedly Cuthbert Rawlins was devotedly attached to his wife, and consequently to be a good husband in the common acceptation of the words was not very difficult. He was so happy at home that he really had not much temptation to spend money in dissipation. Recently, too, Phoebe had presented him with a little son, and he was beginning to feel the dignity of the paternal character, and the easy comforts of respectability. But there is a Nemesis that only dozes, that never sleeps so soundly that stirring opportunity will not awaken her; and such a Nemesis came down on Cuthbert and Phoebe in the very ugly shape of Hannah Burton.

The woman in her need had often extorted money from them; but they had resolved they would do no more for her. They had been making the excellent resolution that they would live within their income, and now that their little establishment was increased by baby and nurse, they felt it a duty to look to

every shilling—so they said to each other.

Consequently, when one evening Burton called and entreated assistance, she was told—not unkindly, but still with firmness—that they really could not do anything more for her.

“And you won’t!” exclaimed the woman, “not if I tell you the real truth what it is I want it for?”

“We can’t,” said Phoebe, hushing and trying to quiet the baby that had seemed frightened at Burton’s voice; “but you can tell us anything you like. Cuthbert, dear,” she added, turning to Rawlins, “do ring the bell for nurse; she must have done her supper. Baby is frightened of Burton.”

“Frightened is it!” shrieked the woman, as if her wrath was rising. “I shouldn’t wonder if it had good cause. Now look here—you had better lend me the ten pounds I want, you had indeed. I tell you for your good.”

“Don’t be insolent, Mrs. Burton,” said Rawlins, “and I advise you not to threaten, or I shall turn you out of the house.”

"And can you talk to me in that way," exclaimed Burton, "after all I have done for you both!"

At this moment the nurse fetched away baby, and Phoebe had a moment's time to ponder on what Burton "had done for them."

"What is your trouble now?" she said, in a tone that was a little kindly.

"I want money," exclaimed Burton, "to pay the lawyers to get somebody I am fond of out of trouble, that's why I want ten pounds."

"To get somebody you are fond of out of trouble? I don't quite understand," said Phoebe.

"Don't you? Then you are a greater innocent than I thought," cried the woman. "Now do you suppose," she continued, "that nobody is to take a liking to anybody, and be ready to go through fire and water for him but yourself?"

"Don't talk in that way, Burton," said Phoebe, shrinking further away from the woman, "it is not nice."

"Now look here," resumed Burton; "they've

taken somebody I like, off to prison on a false charge, and I want the money to pay the lawyers to prove he is innocent. Now will you give it me, or will you not?"

"We really cannot," said Phoebe, with considerable firmness; "besides, the man is not your husband, is he?"

"No, I am not married—but maybe marriage is to come. Oh, to think of what I have done for you," cried Burton, "and you so comfortable and happy, it is enough to break one's heart!"

"I am sorry if our happiness breaks your heart," said Phoebe; "and as for what you did in helping us before we were married, I think you have been pretty well paid."

"You do—do you?"

"Yes, I do," reiterated Phoebe; "and besides, you must have been very extravagant to spend all your savings."

"Maybe I have lent instead of spent, as you would have done if Mr. Rawlins had asked you."

"Really you must go," said Rawlins, "I can-

not allow such rudeness. Phoebe, my love," he continued, "go upstairs."

"Not just yet, if you please," pleaded Burton, with sudden calmness. "I have one little remark to make to you, Mrs. Rawlins. Your precious husband would never have thought of you if it had not been for your fortune."

"It is false! false!" cried Phoebe; but she burst into tears as she added, "Oh, Cuthbert, silence her—silence her!"

"Leave the house, you liar," exclaimed Rawlins, putting his hand on Burton's shoulder and pushing her towards the door.

"Liar I have been for you, but now I am speaking the truth, and you know it," replied the woman.

"She is mad—she is mad!" cried Rawlins.

"You are horribly wicked, Burton, to say such things," sobbed Phoebe, "Mr. Rawlins never heard of my fortune till the day we were married; it was the greatest surprise to him."

"No, it wasn't, for I told him all about it months before. I had heard of it from your

godmother's own maid, and now I will wish you a very good night."

So saying, and making a mock curtsy, Hannah Burton left the house, and passed into the gas-lighted street, in a somewhat seething state of mind. Hardly, however, had she walked ten paces when she was touched on the shoulder by a surer hand than that of Cuthbert Rawlins. She was apprehended by a detective, and accused of being concerned in a case of forgery and embezzlement, the principal actor in which was already in custody.

At the next session of the Central Criminal Court both culprits were tried and convicted; the male prisoner being sentenced to seven years' penal servitude, the woman to three years of the same punishment. And thus exit Hannah Burton from our pages.

But the words she had spoken were never forgotten. It was in vain that Cuthbert Rawlins denied, prevaricated, explained away—there was always a residuum of truth to embitter Phoebe's mind and destroy her confidence in

him. The sweet dream that she had been loved wholly and solely for herself, was dissipated for ever, and in the recoil of her feelings she did her husband less than justice with regard to his present affection. The result was that his home became less attractive than formerly, and had less of his presence. In after years Phoebe was glad to throw herself on the sympathy of her own family, in many a trial which came to her, bitterly repenting her girlish duplicity and clandestine marriage.

CHAPTER XX.

WEDDING BELLS.—CONCLUSION.

Un cœur, cela veut un os à ronger.

VICTOR HUGO.

Call not that man wretched who, whatever ills he suffers,
has a child to love.

SOUTHEY.

IN seasons of sorrow, we are apt to shrink from duties that require action, and to chafe at circumstances which are in reality blessings. Catherine's death took place only a few weeks before the time appointed for relinquishing Telford House, and Mrs. Freeth moaned over the necessity for exerting herself which the removal of a family entailed. But the necessity was beneficently ordained; it roused her from the

depressing woe which indulgence only deepened.

The new home was a pleasant, commodious villa in one of the Western suburbs. It was an old house lately renovated, with many rooms on a floor, and a broad staircase with shallow steps; and these were no trifling advantages to poor Mrs. Freeth, whose failure of sight threatened "total eclipse." This great affliction she had borne in these latter days with still increasing patience, often expressing her thankfulness for the long years of service her sight had rendered in the bygone time when she had used her eyes so much. She had taken a great liking to the new house, and felt that if sight might be spared to know it thoroughly well, it was just the home to help a blind person to resignation. It was surrounded by a lovely garden, redolent of sweets, with mossy turf and rounded gravel paths; a garden with old trees in it, which song-birds did not despise, as they often proved by breaking the silence of the spot.

Janet Gillespie was quite as heart-broken as Catherine's parents; and they knew her devo-

tion too well to doubt her anguish. But it was good for her also to have employment, and she found it, though with light duties, when she was again installed in the nursery, little Lucy being now her sole charge. Janet was a great comfort to Mrs. Freeth, and managed to relieve her very much of household cares. But the old nurse was never a very robust woman, and Catherine's death seemed to age her ten years. It is understood that whenever she dies, she is to be buried at Shinglebeach.

Trouble told also on Hubert Freeth. His hair grew suddenly very white—he began to stoop a little, and tell-tale lines showed themselves about the mouth and eyes. He, however, maintained good health, and relaxed but little in the fulfilment of professional duties, until the time came when Gilbert was an efficient assistant. But Hubert Freeth cared less for what is called “society” than heretofore, and often spent quiet evenings at home with his Bessie—not unfrequently reading to her, and simplifying abstruse subjects, as in the old days.

And as the seasons rolled by, Time did his

kindly work. It became possible to talk of approaching weddings, and to contemplate Mrs. Freeth wearing a silver-grey satin dress instead of her heavy black.

Frank Raybrooke's ship had been round the world, and he, when First Lieutenant, thought it high time he should be married. Sir Algonnon had been recalled to England by the demise of old Lady Raybrooke, business tending to enrich him accruing therefrom; and he also urged that the wedding should not be needlessly delayed. He, however, was not quite so much at the Freeths as he had been formerly.

It is more than a year since Catherine's death, and a clamour of wedding bells proclaims the double marriage which has taken place in the Freeth family. Lionel Freeth and Aline Brindley, and Frank Raybrooke and Jane Freeth, have plighted their troth, with brightest prospects of happiness before them.

Reuben Appersley had been invited to the wedding; he however excused himself on some sufficient plea. But he wrote a right cousinly letter to Jenny, accompanied with a bridal

offering of considerable value. Perhaps he did not wish to meet Algernon Raybrooke. Perhaps, as he had recently become engaged to Hester Otway, he might have felt a little awkwardness in either announcing or concealing the circumstance on such an occasion !

Those two marriages have realized the bright expectations entertained concerning them. In each case the union has been one of "mutual help and comfort," tending to make husband and wife alike doubly brave and noble, and strong in doing the right, and eschewing the evil, in those trials and temptations which no human life can wholly escape. There is one special trouble of the sailor's wife—long protracted separation from her husband ; and Jenny has not yet grown reconciled to what she chooses to call his desertion. I am afraid she has her spasms of jealousy—of his ship. Frank is Post-Captain now, and in command.

But his brother is always on the look out for naval intelligence, and many a pleasant piece of news he has found means to send Jenny

half a day before she would have otherwise received it.

Algernon often sees his old friend Lady Hartington, who has been for some years a widow, and much stricken by the loss of her husband. Indeed, it may be said that Algernon is like a son to her, if the relation of mother and son can be imitated. Always does she use her influence over him for good ends. Her persuasions had much to do with his re-entering Parliament, where he has already distinguished himself. She was a little disappointed that the expected book on America was not forthcoming; but, as he said, he had not seen enough of the great Republican experiment to do it justice, and was unwilling to add another crude volume to the number already produced on the subject.

“What is a single year,” he observed, “for the study of a great nation?”

Algernon is a very busy man; he has found his “work” at home, and set about “doing it;” and occupation agrees with him, and makes him happy.

One day, when he was talking with Lady Hartrington, mixing up old memories with present realities, he said,

"Ah! I have altered a good many of my opinions. You remember how I used to hate Mrs. Grundy! Now I am her humble servant. You would admire the good advice I give to Frank and Jane, and how I persuade them always to set an easy chair for Mrs. Grundy. I do it myself, too, I assure you."

"I am heartily glad to hear it," cried his friend, now a venerable old lady.

"Yes, I knew you would be glad that I had gained a little wisdom; that is why I told you."

"Algernon," said Lady Hartrington, after a slight pause, "I wish you would marry."

"Nay, dear friend, for once you ask me to do too much," he replied, with emotion. "It would be rank infidelity."

"To an Idea!" observed Lady Hartrington.

"Never mind. Some ideas are more to us than any tangible realities. My *Love* has taught me *Life*, and something higher. I could not be

inconstant to it, even if I tried. I suppose you know," he added, after awhile, "that Appersley has married again?"

"Yes, I heard so."

"Ah! well, I was not sure; he is so out of your set. I remember the present wife very well, and have a strong impression that they are excessively happy. But, dear Lady Hartrington," he continued, "though I talk so wisely of 'Mrs. Grundy' now, I do not believe I should have appreciated her services to society but for your counsel. I shudder sometimes to think of the mischief I might have done."

"It was well that you drew back when you did," said Lady Hartrington. "But, my dear Algernon, what is the use of dwelling on the old trouble?"

"What you call a trouble, dear friend, is the cherished memory of my life," cried he. "That is why I recur to it; but I can only do so to you, therefore forgive me."

Lady Hartrington never told him of the mischief that had been done, for the knowledge would have blighted his life. She never hinted

even that she had stamped out those first sparks which might have led to the fire which burns and blackens a fair fame. Either Algernon's attentions to Catherine had been marked enough to provoke tattle, or else the slander which had really been the cause of her illness and death had found some vent, rising though it did from a lower stratum of society. But Lady Hartrington had been indignant at the first word breathed against "her dear friend Mrs. Reuben Appersley," and "Algernon Raybrooke, whom she had known from a boy!" "It was shameful, that it was, that such things should be said."

"The two families were about to be allied by marriage, and it was most natural they should be intimate." And when some one observed, "Yes, but Sir Algernon's attentions were long before his brother thought of Miss Jane," Lady Hartrington had retorted, "I beg your pardon!—Algernon spoke to me of his brother's attachment ages before the world heard of it." Yes, Lady Hartrington had "stamped" it all out, but the doing so was one of her many silent good deeds, never known to those they most served.

Jenny sometimes lives on board-ship, but her proper home is a charming residence on the banks of the Thames, not half a mile from her father's house,—that is, by the back way, and down the green lanes; it is double the distance by the high road. And the house has plenty of occupants. Among them is a little maiden, who, from her baby days, has been the delight of Algernon Raybrooke; and there is something in this child—Catherine's kin as well as his, that makes it a central object for all loving thoughts to gather round. As Victor Hugo says, "The heart must have a bone to gnaw."

Algernon was no worse senator and politician because he often unbent to play merrily with a little child. Of course, with the discernment of childhood, little Kate knew that she was beloved, and loved warmly in return. No wonder! Was there not always, in that breast-pocket to which her little fingers had been taught the way, some good gift, ranging through all manner of varieties, from a string of pearls to a box of sugar plums? Bribery and corruption, was it? Ah, love is always bought—there is always

a reason for loving, if we could but see it. Love for love is the purest barter, but there is a traffic on the way to that happy interchange, in which there is much transfer of meaner commodities.

One day the two were alone, the little prattler on Algernon's knee.

"Whose name have you got?" asked Algernon, softly.

"Aunt Casserine's," lisped the child.

"Who loves you?"—with a hug.

"Uncle Alzernon."

"Will you go to Raybrooke and be his little girl?"

"E-es."

"And leave mamma and papa?"

"Take 'em too."

"No, they are too big."

"Den," after a pause, "'ou stay here."

And he did "stay" a considerable portion of every year.

It is mighty pleasant to have the comforts of a home without its cares; and so Algernon Raybrooke found it to be in his brother's house. There was a room always called his, where half

his wardrobe was kept, and mostly there were horses of his in the stable, and servants of his about the house.

On one occasion, when Jenny was preparing to accompany Frank to the Mediterranean, she was a little anxious about Floss, now old and infirm. Algernon was going home for a time, and he offered to take charge of the poor dog. Jenny consented, adding,

“I would not trust her with any one but you.”

“You may safely trust her with me,” said Algernon; and, as if the dog knew what was passing, she laid her head on his knee, and licked his caressing hand.

Floss travelled to Raybrooke Park with all the dignity of a first-class passenger; but there seemed insuperable difficulties about the return journey—always was there a plausible reason why she must still remain. And so it came to pass that Floss died at Raybrooke, and was buried in the Park. There was even a little monument erected to her memory. The pedestal is inscribed with the one word “Fidelity!” cut in the hard stone, and is surmounted with

the figure of a dog. The monument is really so beautiful a piece of sculpture that it is a pity it is so seldom seen. But the dog's grave is in a secluded spot, a little distance from any main avenue, and in the Summer much hidden by the foliage of the trees.

Old Thomas Freeth lived to see his generous intentions carried out to the letter, and to hear golden opinions of the rising young barrister, his great-nephew. But about two years after Lionel's marriage the old man was found dead in his bed—from natural causes, the doctors said. Indeed, there was some evidence that he had anticipated, and prepared for, a sudden death; if, indeed, any death at seventy-six can be called sudden! The few letters which, for legal or prudential purposes, he left behind him, were found arranged in the nicest order, but of ordinary notes and letters there was not one a week old.

Hubert Freeth was his uncle's sole executor, and he and his children inherited the bulk of the old man's fortune. There was a legacy of remem-

brance to his niece, Mrs. Appersley, and some liberal bequests to charities. All the rest of his property came to the Freeths.

Among his effects was found the miniature portrait of a very lovely woman. The bygone fashion of the dress revealed that it belonged to the period of his own early manhood, but the likeness to Lionel's wife was so striking that no one who knew her failed to recognize it. It was a little remarkable that the miniature bore signs of some ineffectual attempt to remove it from its case—probably the old man had intended to destroy it. And now for once the shrewd Hubert Freeth was mystified, and in a great measure mistaken.

"Depend upon it," he said to his wife, "Aline's accidental likeness to some one my poor old uncle loved in early life, was the reason he took such a fancy to her, and did so much for Lionel."

"But did you never hear of any attachment?" asked Mrs. Freeth.

"Never," replied her husband. "We all often wondered that he did not marry, but we never

suspected that he had been, in love. Finally the family decided that he was not a marrying man."

When, through Jane, Algernon heard of the mysterious miniature, he remembered the shock of surprise the old man had evinced on first meeting Mrs. Brindley and her daughter. But he was silent. If his own unhappy love had made him learned in the mysteries of the heart, it had also taught him pity and reverence for the unspoken griefs of others.

Because the miniature portrait was really a fine likeness of Aline, it was given to Lionel, who valued it not only on that account, but with a very sacred tenderness, in memory of his benefactor. Only to very choice friends did he ever show it, but Mrs. Kar was one of these, and sometimes visited at his house, though she always declined mixing with strangers.

The day that he brought out the miniature for Mrs. Kar to see, Aline said inquiringly,

"I suppose you can remember the time when people dressed in that absurd manner?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Kar, "very well indeed. I had a dress exactly like the one painted."

"And did you wear the same funny little curls on your forehead?" asked Aline.

"Yes; in those days we all wore our hair in that manner."

"Very disfiguring and disguising," cried Lionel; and then he added, "And yet the beauty shines through all. How I wonder who she was! Perhaps she died young."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Kar; "perhaps she is an obscure old woman, living somewhere or another on the surface of the earth."

"Well, it is impossible for me to say; but I feel a strange pity for poor old uncle, if he really had a disappointment of the heart."

And now, for a brief space, we must look in at Five Oaks. Old Mrs. Appersley lived to see grand-children, and even to make some attempt to keep them in old-fashioned order. But she had grown so fond of Hester, that she was very lenient to her shortcomings with regard to dis-

cipline. The long parlour has been made a nursery; and a boy's rocking-horse, and a girl's dolls' house, with sundry bats and balls, and hoops and shuttlecocks, have so altered the room that its old associations no longer remain. Only there stretches the same peaceful landscape before the windows, and the Autumn sun goes down behind the great trees with all the olden glory!

In the early days of their married life Hester confessed that she had loved Reuben in her girlhood with such a first, constant, and only love that when he married Catherine she had resolved to remain single for life. The story was so sweet that he won her to tell it him over and over again. He has very much altered his opinions about a man's wooing, and rather admires a woman who has strength of character to stand out bravely, either in obstinate denial of a suitor, or in defending the object of her choice.

When Mrs. Appersley died, the gold cup was not forthcoming; there was some reason to believe that certain battered pieces of gold sent

anonymously as a donation to a reformatory, and acknowledged by a public advertisement, were the mutilated remains of the once much-prized trophy.

Quite lately Reuben Appersley and Algernon Raybrooke were found voting on the same side in the House of Commons. Of course the question was not a strongly party one—but they voted on the winning side, and, meeting in the lobby afterwards, shook hands very cordially.

More recently still, at a time when Captain Raybrooke was abroad, Algernon visited his brother's wife one morning, evidently in a state of high satisfaction.

"Jenny, I have something very pleasant to tell you," he exclaimed. "Frank is gazetted a C.B.!"

"Sooner—sooner than he expected!" cried the young wife, her face radiant with pleasure. "Oh! I am so glad!"

"And no doubt the K. will follow in due time," continued Algernon. And he added, after a little pause, "It is a weary thing to wait for dead men's shoes! I confess, Jenny, I

should like to hear you called by a title, and to feel that you had it by your husband's winning, instead of having to wait till my death for the distinction."

The intelligence of honour conferred on her husband had naturally touched her; but, knowing all she knew, there was something pathetic in Algereon's emphasis on the words "hear you." The tears sprang to her eyes.

"Tears!" he cried; "why, Jenny dear, what is it?"

"Algernon," she said, with a little sob, "it is not brotherly of you to say such things. As if we did not love you better than title and fortune, and everything else in the world!"

"Forgive me this once—I will never do so again," he exclaimed, pressing her hand warmly; and then he added, gaily, "Now, if you like to put on your hat, we might walk down the green lanes and give your mother the good news."

THE END.

MESSRS. HURST AND BLACKETT'S

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